Acclaim for MICHAEL WILDING

'If, like most of us, you've begun to sense that life is not quite so simple, then maybe Wilding is exactly who you should be reading.' – David English, *Weekend Australian*.

'The literature of challenge rather than the literature of escape.' – Chris de Bono, *Melbourne Herald*.

'Good on women ... good on obsession.' – Christina Stead.

'Rich in humour, fantasy and sharp social observation.' – Bruce Bennett, *Contemporary Novelists*.

'Wilding has steadily produced, for over thirty years, work of high and lasting merit ... To be a writer like Wilding is to be whole in a sense that should never be lost, not as long as the written word appears between the pages of a literary book.' – Don Graham, *Antipodes*.

Academia Nuts

'A witty campus novel? In 2004? It seemed as likely as a holiday romance set amid the tropical delights of Guantanamo Bay ... But it is very funny. So funny that I had to stop reading it in bed in case my roars of laughter were disturbing the neighbours: so funny that it deserves to be the final great campus novel. It is unlikely to be challenged. For what Wilding's aged unreconstructed dons are playing with such absurd brio is unmistakably the last waltz.' – Laurie Taylor, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*.

'Darkly hilarious …wickedly funny … read it and laugh out loud. Then look on it again and weep.' – Suzy Baldwin, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

'Michael Wilding's droll, dark, mordantly witty tales display the groves of academe worm-eaten with cynicism, careerism, bureaucracy and political correctness. Funny and worrying.' – David Lodge.

'Wilding at his absolute satirical best ... This book will either make you laugh out loud or very angry, depending on your age, gender and ideological commitment.' – David Williamson.

Asian Dawn

'A fast-paced read with lots of seedy sex and compromising secrets, plus a few well aimed jabs at the academic world.' – Cameron Woodhead, *The Age*.

'A compelling narrative with a cast of enigmatic figures ... Wilding blends his wit with the comic and the bizarre in a novel that surprises with its twists and turns.' – Irina Dunn, *Network News*.

Aspects of the Dying Process

'One of the best writers of short stories in Australia today.' – *ABR*.

'The short story writer as sociologist, the short story writer as photo-realist . . .Wilding can accurately pace a story and make a woman ironical and elusive in just a few sentences.' – *Times Literary Supplement*.

'Sensuously evocative ... crisply dramatic.' – Brian Kiernan, *The Australian*.

In the Valley of the Weed

'The Plant novels are hybrids of satire and crime fiction, too funny to be called bleak, but concealing a complex seriousness of purpose ... The least attractive aspects of neoliberalism and its consequences come in for some savage critique in this intermittently hilarious novel.' – Kerryn Goldsworthy, *The Age*.

Little Demon

'Plant's case may have started out as a simple criminal investigation, but it swiftly, and unforgettably, shines bright lights onto the way we live, and some of the reasons why.' – Derek Turner, *Spectator Australia.*

'Wilding writes the Plant novels with apparent ease. At the same time, he dares those of us who averse to conspiracy theories to wonder whether we have been too sceptical.' – Peter Pierce, *The Weekend Australian.*

Living Together

'A very funny book and a perfect picture of the people, the time, the place ... Wilding's writing has a dry vitality – alert, acid, but often grimly intelligent.' – David Marr, *The Bulletin*.

'He is so exhilaratingly adept with narrative you cannot put the book down . . .Wilding's pen is sharp as a rapier.' – Jan Meek, *Vogue Australia*.

National Treasure

'Witty and genuinely funny ... Wilding's zesty writing and sheer fun with his subject makes for a diverting read. But don't be conned. This is fiction with more truth than lies.' – Christopher Bantick, *Weekend Australian*.

'Thoroughly enjoyable, sometimes hilarious ... But it is not lightweight: it is tough, well-calculated, smoothly witty satire. – Brian Matthews, *ABR*

'Like *Academia Nuts*, it's a fable about the relentless commercialization of what used to be the life of the mind, at once very funny and very depressing.' – Kerryn Goldsworthy, *The Age.*

Raising Spirits, Making Gold and Swapping Wives: the True Adventures of Dr John Dee and Sir Edward Kelly

'The story of Queen Elizabeth I's necromancer, John Dee, as transcribed from original documents interspersed with Michael Wilding's own words. A piece of esoterica designed to startle and delight the modern reader.'

– Peter Porter, *The Economist* Books of the Year.

This is for You

'Erotic, fiercely intelligent and mordantly funny.' – Janette Turner Hospital.

'His stories subvert and transcend not only sexual and social conventions ... but story-telling itself.' – Jim Crace.

'21st century writing for 21st-century people.' – J.P. Donleavy.

Scenic Drive

'Takes you on a trip that shouldn't be missed ... I laughed until I cried. It's rare that I enjoy a book as much as I enjoyed *Scenic Drive*. It's a memorable book, sexy and funny. Once you read it you'll want to turn all your friends onto it.' – Diana Pizza, *Los Angeles Star.*

'First rate fiction.' – Dick Higgins, *Newsart.*

Somewhere New: New and Selected Stories

'What strikes one first, apart from the impressive merits of individual stories, is Wilding's keen sense of literary integrity. Without being self-important or pretentious, Wilding's voice in these stories is always one to attend to: an ironic,

witty, highly educated, and in its indirect way, passionate authorial persona who has believed in literature as a life of principle, has seen many of the bases of that belief assaulted by abstruse theory, trendy anti-realism, and sinecure-seeking cynicism, and yet still in the face of everything, is able to make the affirming act through the agency of fiction ... No one in English writes better fiction about the process of writing than Wilding.' – Don Graham.

'Essential reading.' – Robert Yeo, *Straits Times*.

Superfluous Men

'You have a way of being gloomily funny that speaks for all the early-retired and those who cannot avoid weary contempt for the bureaucrat both in and out of the universities.' – Frank Kermode.

'Wilding's satirical edge evokes in the reader not only sly smiles of recognition but outright guffaws of full-blown belly laughter.' – Irina Dunn, *Quadrant*

'Blackly funny ... Wilding's satire is merciless.' – Kerryn Goldsworthy, *The Age*.

The Magic of It

'The truth in this fiction is at least as entertaining as what has been invented. This is a clever, off-beat rendering of a crime story ... and a protagonist who surely will be back. – Emma Young, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

The Phallic Forest

'Elegantly written and evocative ... an undercurrent of sensitivity and searching for truths.' – Jean Bedford, *National Times*.

The Short Story Embassy: a novel

'Considerable entertainment.' – *Times Literary Supplement*.

'Excruciatingly funny.' – Frank Devine, *National Times*.

'The best of the talent emerging from down under.' – *San Francisco Review of Books*.

The West Midland Underground

'Ensures his status as one of the most interesting writers working here.' – *The Australian*.

Wild Amazement

'Anyone interested in how contemporary Australian writing came to be the way it is, with its strengths and follies, its cliques and patrons, and the challenges it faces, will benefit from reading Wilding's sensitive, sometimes bitchy, often funny and always intelligent tracing of his life's trajectory.' – Peter Corris, *Quadrant*.

'What I think absorbs the reader in the deeply revelatory unmemoir *Wild Amazement* is ... Michael's clear, almost hyperreal remembrance, as if experienced on a guided tour of a radiant, countercultural Disneyland, of a way of life, and a gravely joyous bohemia now gone, of how it was, and what a time it was, it really was, in Sydney in the sixties and seventies, in the Newcastle and the Journos' Club and the Push parties and the plans for a literary life.' – Bob Ellis, *Overland*.

Wildest Dreams

'Deserves to be thought of as a contemporary classic.' – Adrian Caesar. An *Australian* Book of the Year.

Also by Michael Wilding

FICTION

Aspects of the Dying Process
Living Together
The Short Story Embassy
The West Midland Underground
Scenic Drive
The Phallic Forest
Pacific Highway
Reading the Signs
The Man of Slow Feeling: Selected Short Stories
Under Saturn
Great Climate
Her Most Bizarre Sexual Experience
This is for You
Book of the Reading
Somewhere New: New and Selected Stories
Wildest Dreams
Academia Nuts
Wild Amazement
Superfluous Men
The Midlands, and Leaving Them
National Treasure
The Prisoner of Mount Warning
The Magic of It
Asian Dawn
In the Valley of the Weed
Little Demon
The Travel Writer
Find Me My Enemies
Cover Story

DOCUMENTARY

The Paraguayan Experiment
Raising Spirits, Making Gold, and Swapping Wives: The True Adventures of Dr John Dee and Sir Edward Kelly
Wild Bleak Bohemia: Marcus Clarke, Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Kendall: A Documentary

NON-FICTION

Milton's Paradise Lost
Cultural Policy in Great Britain (with Michael Green and Richard Hoggart)
Australians Abroad (ed. with Charles Higham)
Marcus Clarke
*The Tabloid Story Pocket Boo*k (ed.)
We Took Their Orders and Are Dead (ed. with Shirley Cass, Ros Cheney and David Malouf)
The Radical Reader (ed. with Stephen Knight)
The Workingman's Paradise by William Lane (ed.)
Political Fictions
Dragons Teeth: Literature in the English Revolution
Revolution and Restoration: Milton, Dryden, Marvell, Butler
Social Visions
The Radical Tradition: Lawson, Furphy, Stead (The Colin Roderick Lectures)
Studies in Classic Australian Fiction
The Oxford Book of Australian Short Stories (ed.)
Air Mail From Down Under (ed. with Rudi Krausmann)
Best Stories Under the Sun, 1 – 3 (ed. with David Myers)
*Heart Matter*s (ed. with Peter Corris)
*Cyril Hopkins' Marcus Clark*e (ed. with Laurie Hergenhan and Ken Stewart)
Wild & Woolley: a Publishing Memoir
Growing Wild
Wild About Books
Marcus Clarke: Novelist, Journalist and Bohemian
Colonials, Expatriates, Radicals, Moderns and Postmoderns: essays in Australian Literature

POINT DANGER

MICHAEL WILDING

ARCADIA

Point Danger © Michael Wilding 2026

ISBN **978-1-923267-62-6**

All Rights Reserved

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act of 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover photograph: Debra Adamson

Cover design: Amelia Walker

To Debra Adamson

Chapter One

Fullalove was stuffing scraps of paper and ripped-up empty cardboard packets into the tiny fireplace of his ungentrified inner-city hovel. The walls of the house were lined with bookshelves and the bookshelves were full of volumes of conspiracy theory, political extremism, sex, drugs and suchlike, suppressed heresies and concealed scandals. All good stuff. The disallowed, the disapproved of, the disinterred. The saved from the flames of destruction. And amidst it all he was kindling fire. Or attempting to. He scrabbled around amongst the cardboard boxes, looking for newspaper.

'You know the worst thing about the internet?' he asked.

'Surveillance?' Plant dutifully suggested.

'Apart from surveillance. The worst thing is that it's helped kill off newspapers. Put half of them out of business, and the rest are shrunken, pathetic shadows of what they used to be.'

'You never believed in them anyway.'

'It's not a matter of belief. It's a matter of not having enough newsprint to light a fire. You can't get cardboard to burn without some newsprint to start it off.'

'Further implications of the ongoing destruction of print culture,' Plant intoned.

Fullalove struck a couple of matches that broke before igniting.

'Even matches don't work any more.'

'Thank heavens,' Plant said. 'You're not going to light that.'

'Too right I am.'

'You'll set fire to the chimney.'

'Naaah.'

'And burn the whole place down.'

'Naaah,' Fullalove said again.

'Put it in the recycling,' Plant said. 'That would be safer.'

'Safer!' Fullalove snorted. No other word for it. A definite snort.

'The recycling just gets tipped into the incinerator or used for landfill. Recycling is an illusion. Another illusion. Liberal lies. Greenie gibberish.'

Plant shrugged and might have argued, but Fullalove cut him off.

'Apart from which it certainly isn't safer. Safer! You don't go revealing your lifestyle by putting stuff out on the street for anyone to nose through.'

'What would it matter?'

'Matter? Give them a handle on you. Like they used to go through celebrities' garbage bins. For the gossip columns, they claimed. They find out what you buy, how you live, what you eat, what you drink, what newspaper you read, where you're vulnerable.'

'They find an empty box of tissues and so my life is immediately threatened?'

'Sure is. They see what brands you regularly use, buy a box, impregnate it with some toxin or other, some lethal virus, or some mind-altering spray, put it in your house when you're out shopping, and there you are.'

'Where?'

'You're fucked.'

Fullalove picked up one of the newspapers he had unearthed beneath the cardboard boxes and began tearing it apart and stuffing the pages into the fire, which had finally ignited.

'You want them to know what you're reading?' he asked.

'You clearly don't.'

'Exac'ly.'

'I don't think they'd pick you as a person of interest because you read *The Australian* or *The Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Daily Telegraph*. They're hardly radical. I don't see that it matters.'

'Of course it does. There are still some papers that purport to be critical of the system.'

'Purport?'

'Of course. The days of the truly radical have gone. For a while, anyway. But they'll return. Meanwhile, the whole recycling fad is just a way of getting you to reveal what papers you read and how much booze

you drink. And if you read a whole lot of papers and magazines and put them out there, they're going to wonder why and find you a suitable subject for surveillance.'

'And why does finding out what you drink figure?'

'A way to spot your vulnerability. Stick a syringe through the cork and inject your favourite bottle of wine with some psychotropic drug. Or a lethal one, for that matter. Slip it into your fridge one day when you're out.'

'You really believe that?'

'Like slipping a few death caps in with your magic mushrooms. Can't be too careful,' Fullalove said, not exactly answering the question. 'Why take the risk?'

Plant looked on, uncertain whether to register incomprehension or to take the warning on board.

'I'm not saying they're doing it,' Fullalove offered, 'though they probably are. I'm just saying they've got the ability. It's all in place, so you just step out of line or say the wrong thing, expound the wrong politics, then you can expect to be monitored.'

'Expect.'

'Sure.'

'But not for certain, not for sure.'

'Like they used to say, nothing's for certain, except for death and taxes. To which I'd now add surveillance.'

'Just to be on the safe side.'

'Of course. Besides, apart from being safe, burning stuff gets rid of the crap. Keeps the place tidy.'

Plant registered the ash spreading across the hearth and through the room. Perhaps that was tidier than stacks of cardboard boxes, egg cartons, or old newspapers. Though once the fire had finished, the newspapers and biscuit wrappers and toilet-roll centres would begin to pile up again.

'I don't think tidiness is the issue,' Plant said. 'Anyway, what is tidy?'

'Having nothing,' Fullalove said. 'The anchoritic life. In a cave in the desert, no furniture, no possessions, that would be tidy.'

'Is that an aspiration?'

Fullalove appeared to consider. He wrinkled his nose.

'Maybe no, not really,' he conceded. 'But you know, you can go minimalist. Most things you don't need.'

'Including books?'

Fullalove looked round at his book-lined walls, his book-clogged hallway, and, could he have looked round corners, into the rest of his book-filled rooms full of unacceptable thoughts and forbidden ideas.

'No,' he said. 'No, there's enough book destruction going on by publishers and libraries.'

'And it's your mission to preserve the endangered.'

'The ones worth preserving.'

'The subversive, the offensive, the ...'

'Yeah, the good ones.'

'But not newspapers.'

'Not this lot,' he said, ripping them apart and feeding them to the flames.

Plant watched him and reflected. Fullalove's exertions had a note of desperation about them. Make work. Something to do to fill up the time in the great emptiness, now that newspapers offered less and less worth reading, some token activity amidst the continuing decline of everything.

'I might come and stay with you up the coast for a while,' Fullalove said.

Plant said nothing. He nodded, which could be taken to mean anything or nothing: 'Yes, I heard you but I'm not up there, I'm down here', or 'Sure, whatever.' He couldn't claim he was going to be busy up there with no time for visitors. He was as aimless and unoccupied as Fullalove.

'Might be safer up there out of Sydney.'

'Could be,' Plant said, not sure what Fullalove sought safety from. 'Though it's full of anti-vaxxers up there.'

It might be safer if he were there on his own, Plant reflected. But with Fullalove visiting and unlikely to be able to sit still, drifting in and out and going nosing around, how safe was that? And not only in relation to virus transmission.

But could he spend the rest of his life in isolation, alone, unvisited? Probably, he decided. And what if he never got another case to investigate? Well, face that when he came to it. Like now. Start practising now.

'You'll go mad living out there in the sticks on your own,' Fullalove said. 'You need company. Human company.'

'And you're offering it.'

Fullalove grinned agreement.

'We'll make it a road trip. On the road again. Pacific Highway. Like back in the old days. Excitement at every bend. Exhilaration on every incline.'

'It's the Pacific Motorway now. Smooth and flat and graded.'

'It's still a road. Don't be fooled by all that upgrading and levelling out, there's still potential despite the smooth surface.'

'Potential for what?'

'Excitement. Adventure. The thrill of the chase.'

The last time Plant had driven north with Fullalove had been a nightmare, Fullalove insisting on rolling joint after joint, freaking Plant out every time he saw a highway patrol car or approached a random breath test. Never again.

'Give me a couple of weeks to get the place organized. You can come up then.'

'You've got it as organized now as it ever will be,' Fullalove assured him.

'Maybe,' Plant said. 'But you're going to need your own vehicle to get around in up there, anyway. Just give me a couple of weeks.'

'Whatever,' Fullalove agreed. 'When are you heading up there?'

'Soon.'

'Like this week? Tomorrow?'

'Something like that,' Plant offered, evasively, sensing a pressure. Not that it mattered.

'Sooner the better,' Fullalove agreed.

Chapter Two

Back in the Valley of the Weed Plant surveyed his five-acre rural retreat. He had mown the lawns; well, he had cut the grass. Calling it lawns was a bit imaginative. Still, nevertheless, seeing it mown gave him a comfortable feeling of satisfaction. Always needing attention after he'd been away. And when he hadn't, for that matter.

He relaxed in his deckchair, letting the years of anxiety leach from his body. Maybe he could've got up and walked out into the surrounding bush and collected living leeches on his legs as he walked around. But the leaching of anxiety was more conceptual or metaphorical than that. He wasn't sure what. But he didn't need actual leeches sucking away at his blood. Just the sense of anxiety being exuded and evaporating in the clear air. Anxieties he never knew he had. They drifted off, dating back decades.

Research assistance, investigative reporting, his card said. Hard to call it a business card when there wasn't much business. None, in fact. Not a case to investigate, not an investigation to report. Nothing to work on at all. And having let the anxieties drift away, now he was bored. Inevitably, with nothing to worry about, nothing to have to deal with. It was one of those recurrent afflictions that he found he shared with Sherlock Holmes. Boredom. Not given to much self-reflection, Plant did not explore further points of similarity. Or dissimilarity. He was not going to sit around enumerating his investigative failures and successes, and then sit there comparing them with the achievements of that archetypal progenitor. Possibly he shared something of the intuitive acuity of that great detective of the past. Possibly he didn't. There was nothing to be gained from detailed analysis, as far as Plant could see. Except dissatisfaction. There was no point in seeking to itemize failure, error, wrong turnings, closed doors. They were all there if he cared to look. Possibly. Presumably. Possibly not. Best to leave it all uninvestigated, which allowed the possibility of a positive outcome, were investigation

to be undertaken. He was content to leave it at that. It was not a case he had been hired and paid to investigate, after all. But boredom. Without a doubt he could compete with Holmes in that league. The league of the bored. Poirot, too, he was a victim of boredom. Anyway, forget fiction. What about the real world? What about real people? Graham Greene was one. Another victim of boredom. Though hardly another player in the private investigator game. A spy, then. Maybe I should have been a spy, Plant mused. But had that relieved Greene's boredom? Maybe boredom was innate both to private investigators and to secret agents, the force that fired their curiosity, the need to be diverted, distracted, doing something, doing anything. Or was it the blight of the writer? Plight, maybe. The frustration at the lack of a plot. Maybe Holmes's frustration at the lack of a plot to investigate was Conan Doyle's frustration at the lack of a plot to write. Maybe I should have been a writer, Plant speculated. Well, he had been a writer. A ghost-writer, for a while. A bit of journalism. And a thesis writer, earlier. And he had known boredom back then. It was nothing new, none of it was. Nothing new under the sun.

Global financial collapse, catastrophic bush fires, cataclysmic flooding, world-wide viruses, wars and rumours of wars, exciting times of the end of civilization as we know it, and amidst it all Plant was bored. Bored, unmotivated, and without a case to investigate, with nothing much to do at all. Nature was all around and he tried to respond to it. The birds called out but no one else did, neither called nor phoned nor texted nor emailed nor wrote letters nor communicated in any way at all. The laughing jackasses laughed and had a good time. The noisy miners exulted in their noise. Plant vegetated in silence.

Chapter Three

It wasn't all self-imprisonment. He did get out, once in a while. Walked on a beach. Went to a shop. Just drove somewhere.

He was driving through a light-industrial estate on the Gold Coast, having turned off the main road which was blocked by a traffic hold-up, and he was now lost and directionless. Self-storage units and car repair workshops and builders-supplies' yards lined the streets. He drove slowly, trying to find some indication of how to get back to the highway, or indeed to any road that might lead him out of this warren.

He had vague memories of a discount shop somewhere like this, somewhere he'd driven through before without taking much notice or could no longer remember. Maybe he could pick up a new shirt or a remaindered DVD or CD or a couple of mugs to replace the ones that were going to get chipped or cracked or otherwise maltreated when Fullalove arrived. Maybe more, half a dozen maybe, just to be sure.

And then he spotted amongst the ice works and plumbing supplies a second-hand bookshop. Books, a sign announced. Not a very noticeable sign. If he hadn't been lost and driving slowly he might not have seen it, unobtrusive, unimpressive, not soliciting passers-by, presumably doing most of its business online like most of the second-hand book businesses now, assuming they were doing any business at all. He pulled up and parked the car and walked back to have a look. He went inside, why not, what else did he have to do?

He nosed along the shelves, not looking for anything in particular, just looking at whatever was there. And a lot was there. It was like one of those real bookshops of the past, its stock representing decades of production, not just the contemporary outpourings of the global entertainment industry, but books that no longer appeared, books no longer preserved in libraries, no longer reprinted, no longer reissued in new editions, endangered species. Book club editions, early green Penguin crime, pale blue Pelicans, Nelson sixpenny classics, Collins

clear-type, Everyman's Library, World's Classics. He picked up Oliver Simon's *Introduction to Typography*, and S. H. Steinberg's *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, classic textbooks of a culture now fading, maybe in terminal decline. He added Miles Franklin's *My Career Goes Bung* and headed for the assistant behind the counter.

'Hello there,' she said.

Plant said 'Hello' politely.

'Plant,' she said.

He looked at her with blank incomprehension, increasingly his default position.

'Lucy,' she said. And then to clarify it, 'The husband-killer, remember?'

Plant did the blanching, gasping, reeling number.

'Not that I did. Kill him, that is. But you refused to believe that I didn't.'

'Lucy,' he said.

'Plant,' she said. 'Glad that we got that clear. And for the record, I could never kill anybody, not even my husband.'

'I don't think I ever said anything ...'

'You don't think you ever said anything. Precisely. That showed your treacherous heart. You could have said you believed I was innocent. As I was. But you didn't. You said nothing.'

He stood there saying nothing yet once more. It wasn't at all clear to him what there was to say. But he gave it a try.

'I thought you were living ...'

'The other side of the world,' she finished for him, over him, indeed. 'Yes, I was. But now I'm here.'

'Incontrovertibly,' Plant said.

'"Incontrovertibly,"' she said, with marked disdain. 'How about, "How nice to see you again"?'

'But of course ...'

'But of course,' she repeated. She could have sneered it, but instead she filled it with surprised hope. And laughed.

'So how did you end up here?' Plant asked.

'I could ask the same of you,' she said. 'Indeed, I shall. How did you end up here?'

'Nice spot.'

'Precisely,' she agreed.

'And what do you find nice about it?' he asked.

'Oh, the weather and the beaches and the weed.'

'Ah,' he said.

'Well, isn't that why everyone's here?'

'Quite a few, I guess.'

'You included.'

He tried shrugging but she was not to be shrugged off.

'True?'

He tried pulling a face, any old face.

'Why've you become so shifty in your old age?' she asked.

'The wisdom of years.'

She laughed dismissively.

It was a substantial shop. Inside it was much larger than it had seemed from the street. It stretched back from the entrance, walls lined with shelves, shelves packed with books, and more shelves lined up in the body of the shop. A bench of bargain specials stood beside the front window out on the pavement. All very functional. The ambience of a warehouse rather than a treasure chest of incunabula.

Lucy was wearing blue denim overalls and a white cotton shirt. Work gear. Though nonetheless exuding the note, the stitch, maybe, of the well-tailored. It looked attractive, however it was achieved. But it also signalled the heavy-lifting part of the book trade. It was like being dressed to lug sacks of potatoes around. Or whatever. Washed potatoes. Dusty maybe but not dirty. And heavy. A heavy and unexalted product.

None of the atmosphere of art or culture, of the imagination, of the elevated and exalted that could hang around second-hand bookshops and their staff. Instead it proclaimed the functional, the unpretentious.'I've always loved books,' she said. It was what lay behind her enrolling in English Literature at university. Back in the days when the subject still existed, and had not been subsumed into communications or cultural studies or media or literary theory or gender studies or creative writing, if subsumed and surviving at all. It was why she had married one of her lecturers, before he had migrated to wider fields, magic, multiculturalism and inauthenticity studies. Books had been her salvation from despair, her escape from emptiness, desolation, widowhood. Though to be perfectly honest widowhood wasn't something she was that anxious to escape from. She quite enjoyed the status, had even considered dressing all in black, the way Greek and Italian widows dressed, an assertion of freedom, liberation, triumph.

'All of which may sound a trifle excessive. But, really, it isn't that excessive at all. I just get a bit carried away when I finally find someone I can talk to who understands what I'm talking about. And you do, don't you Plant? I've always felt you were someone who was able to understand. Well, you'd have to, wouldn't you, in your line of work?'

He smiled in acknowledgement of her understanding his being understanding.

'So this is your shop, then?' he said.

'I manage it.'

'But you don't own it.'

'No, alas,' she laughed.

'Who does?'

'Are we in private investigator mode, or something? Now I get it. This wasn't just a casual visit, you're in pursuit of something. Or someone. You're on a case.'

'Not at all. If only.'

'Mysterious villains.'

'No.'

'Disaffected academics.'

'I'd no idea you were here,' he said. 'I'd no idea the shop even existed. I just blundered across it.'

'You just blundered across it.'

'Yes.'

'Why wouldn't I believe that?'

'It's the truth.'

She looked at him appraisingly, and laughed some more.

'I would've thought you would've known about it, living up here.'

'Known what?'

'Known who,' she said. 'Or whom, maybe.'

'Who?'

'Who owns the shop.'

'No,' he said. 'I don't know that many people up here.'

'Doesn't that make you feel isolated?'

'Yes.'

'You poor thing,' she said, concerned, consoling.

'No, I rather like it. Most of the time.'

'I must introduce you around,' she said.

'No, no. I'm fine. There's no need.'

'Of course there is. Otherwise you wouldn't be so quick to refuse the offer.'

'You make it sound like I need help.'

She smiled. 'You said it.'

'So you're living up here,' he said.

'Like you, apparently.'

'Yes. In the country?'

'Not any more. I've done the rural stagnation bit. I grew up in it. All very nice. Much appreciated. But I've become urbanized. I like a civilized environment. Cafes. Bookshops. People.'

'Industrial estates. Self-storage units,' Plant offered.

'They're rather useful, actually. And you'd be amazed at the sort of people who use them. And the variety. Do you always try to be a downer, Plant? Are self-storage units and industrial estates so painful to your aesthetic sensibilities? What a delicate creature you must be underneath it all. Not even underneath. On top of everything else.'

'Just observing. Nothing judgemental,' he said.

'Why don't I believe you, Plant?'

'You've become a hardened woman, I suppose.'

'Fuck you, Plant,' she said, picking up a scuffed and faded, last-century hardback and swinging at Plant with it. He stepped aside and avoided any impact.

'I rest my case,' he said.

She blew him a kiss.

'Let's start again,' she said. 'The story of my life,' she added parenthetically.

Plant nodded agreement.

'So where are you living?' he asked.

'Here,' she said.

'Here?'

'The Gold Coast. Just down the road. Point Danger.'

'Point Danger?'

'Great name, isn't it? I couldn't resist. Loved the name. Southern tip of the Gold Coast. And the airport's just up the road at Coolangatta. Nice and convenient. I like to be reasonably near an airport.'

'Why's that?'

'Why?' She sounded surprised. 'Well travel, convenience, obviously.'

'Ah,' Plant said.

'What's going on in that suspicious, investigating mind of yours? You think I'm planning a sudden getaway?'

'I don't know. Are you?'

'I've only just met you again. Why would I do that?'

He shook his head slowly. But genially. Smiling. Best say nothing.

'So who owns the shop?'

'I'm surprised you don't know, living up here,' she said again. 'He's quite well known. Cultured sort of chap. Comfortably off.'

'What's his name?'

'Osbourne. Gilbert Osbourne.'

'Oh yes. What does he do?'

'Owns the shop. Used to be an agent and a publisher.'

'Yeah, maybe,' Plant said. 'The name's sort of familiar.'

Was it? He wasn't sure.

'More Fullalove's scene,' he offered. 'Second-hand books,' he added, in clarification.

'Fullalove?' she said

'Bloke I know.'

'Bloke you know.'

'Yes.'

'Do you think you could possibly be less specific, more non-committal?' she asked, all radiant smiles, plural smiles, yes, seemed like that, golden locks, bright blue eyes, blazing eyes, laughing at him, but politely, hand up to mouth as if in apology, a few years older than she used to be, but aren't we all, and still looking good.

'You do make me laugh, Plant,' she said. 'I think that's the thing I always remembered about you. And liked,' she added.

'So how did you get into bookselling?' Plant asked.

'I knew Osbourne.'

'How come?'

'Oh, I've know him for years. He was a friend of Archer's. My husband,' she added, 'in case you've forgotten the name.'

'What, at university?'

'Yes, way back. He was one of his students, like me. He went into

publishing, then he got out of publishing and became an agent, then he packed it all in and retired up here and opened a bookshop.'

'What, early retirement?'

'I suppose so. Earlyish. Made his packet and ran. Anyway, he was looking for someone to manage it and one thing led to another and here I am.'

Plant nodded. He realized he had been nodding a lot lately. He sought for some words to utter.

'So once again it's a matter of who you know, not what you know.'

'I've always loved books,' she said. Again. Affronted. 'I was a serious scholar. I put in my hours in Fisher and the Bodleian.'

'Doing what?'

'They're libraries.'

'I do know that. Doing what?'

'Reading books.'

'What sort of books?'

'Serious books. Solid books. Our cultural heritage. That's what the shop's all about. Trying to preserve it. While there are still books still existing to preserve. Before libraries throw them all out and publishers stop publishing.'

'Is that going to happen?'

'It's already happening,' she said.

'That's terrible,' he said.

'It is, yes,' she agreed. 'But there again, it's a bit worrying, isn't it, all this focus on books and print? Preferring to read a book to encountering real-life situations. I know it worries me. I mean, doesn't it make you wonder sometimes what it's all about, what any of it's about, all these terrible things going on in the world, and we prefer to read a novel?'

'I guess so,' Plant said, rather feebly.

Chapter Four

'Let's go get a coffee,' she said. 'In fact,' she said, looking at her watch, 'let's go eat. There's a great Middle Eastern takeaway, we can go and sit and look at the sea and imagine we're in *The Alexandria Quartet*.'

Falafel, hummus, baba ghannouj, stuffed vine leaves, unleavened bread, paper plates balanced on their knees in the front seats of Plant's ageing, bottom-of-the-line Hyundai. And baklava, too. It wasn't quite like *The Alexandria Quartet*. But it was pleasant enough.

'We should get a proper meal some time,' she said. 'For old time's sake. Or for new time's sake, for that matter. I can't take too long off from the shop now. People tend to drop by in their lunch break. But how about dinner some time? If you're interested. If you're free. Oh, are you free? I was sort of assuming you probably were.'

'Yes, I'm free,' Plant admitted.

'I assumed you were.'

'Why?'

'Oh, I don't know, women's intuition. Even non-gender-specific intuition. Though you don't have that. Or do you? Wouldn't you need it as an investigator? You are still an investigator are you?'

'Yes,' he admitted.

'So what are you investigating now?'

'Nothing, actually.'

'Nothing actually. What, just having a break?'

'Pretty much.'

'What, not early retirement?'

He shook his head.

'What theatre people used to call resting?'

'Something like that.'

They sat in his car, parked beside the narrow strip of grass edging the beach, and gazed out at the Pacific. The roar of the surf came through the open windows. There were a few swimmers out there, but otherwise

not much to watch at all, sand, seagulls, ocean, more ocean.

'So what are you doing?' she asked.

'Nothing much.'

'Coming into the shop.'

'Oh, nothing. I just saw it there. I'd got lost driving around. So I thought, might as well have a look in while I'd seen it. I can always do with something to read. So I came in.'

'Why don't I believe you?'

'I've no idea. Why don't you?'

'Are you on some sort of a case?'

'No. Absolutely not.'

'You're up to something, I'm sure.'

'I don't even have a case at the moment.'

'Really? But here you are, wandering around.'

'I'm bored.'

'Oh, how flattering. And I'm the best you could come up with.'

'I didn't know you were here. I didn't even know you were back in Australia.'

'That's how much interest you have in me.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake.'

She put her hand on his arm.

'Just joking, Plant. I think. Winding you up. I'm delighted to see you.'

He nodded.

'You're supposed to reciprocate.'

'Reciprocate?'

'Say the feeling's mutual, only in more engaging tones.'

'Absolutely.'

'"Absolutely". Heavens help us. And I still don't believe you're not up to something.'

'If only.'

She gave him one of those looks described as piercing.

'"Boredom is a pleasing antidote to fear,"' she said.

'Really?'

'Daphne du Maurier. *Rebecca*. There's a copy on the shelves if you want to check it. So what is it you're afraid of, Plant?'

He shook his head. Nothing. The emptiness of boredom.

Chapter Five

Back in the early afternoon Plant lay down on his bed and gazed idly through the window. Nature was out there, rustling and squeaking and whistling and hooting. Probably there were termites chewing and bush rats gnawing and diamond pythons curled up digesting. Let alone black snakes and red-bellies and brown snakes lurking.

Idleness was something to be enjoyed when it presented itself, rather than resented. It would inevitably be impinged upon by demands and necessities and crises and disasters and the need to shop and eat, all too readily. Treasure it while available, he told himself.

He thought idly of Lucy amidst the books. She probably wasn't idle but he couldn't bring up any satisfactory image of what she might be doing. Dusting the shelves maybe, clapping the pages of books together so that the dust flew off them? Probably not. Dispatching orders. Probably. Keeping the stock list up to date. Yes, could be. He raised himself off the bed and sat down at the computer. Looked up the shop online. There it was, listed. He looked for its online catalogue, but there didn't seem to be one. No matter what he tried, nothing came up. How did you sell on the internet without an online catalogue? You didn't. So she wouldn't be very busy at all, sitting there in her warehouse overalls and white shirt, waiting for the occasional customer to pass by and call in. Ah well. He went back to his bed and stretched out some more.

There was no doubt that he was bored. Plant admitted that. Recognized it. Accepted it. And was slowly habituating himself to it. Enjoy the sounds of the birds. Even enjoy the sound of the cicadas. Groove on nature. Just keep clear of mosquitoes. And ticks. And leeches. And fire ants. And brown snakes. And black ones. And red-bellied ones.

He was quite getting into it, allowing calm to settle around him. Peace. Tranquillity. All those things. Undisturbed by radio, television, email, internet, newspapers, telephone.

There was a lot to be said for inactivity. Especially after years of being

active. Active enough. He had less and less anxiety about it. Something would turn up. Eventually. Some research work required on some family archive. Maybe some fact-checking. Even some indexing, if all else failed to materialize.

Idly looking at nature out there and listening to bird songs and thinking about Lucy filled the rest of the idle afternoon. A couple of smokes to ease the idleness along. Boredom was forgotten beneath the delights of idle contemplation. It wasn't a bad life, he told himself.

The mistake was conceding that. Not even vocalizing, just admitting it. Keep your satisfactions secret from yourself lest they invite disruption.

And bumping up the track came the disruptive note of a Toyota ute, all too familiar, the opened and slammed door, the footsteps trudging up to the deck, and then the thumping on the door, hammering it sounded like, but was probably just an ordinary knocking magnified in the now vanished silence of the solitary bliss of an irrecoverable peace.

Plant viewed Fullalove's arrival with as little enthusiasm as Fullalove probably viewed Plant's visits to the city. But each appreciated the toleration of the other. A matter of accommodation. In every sense. Just somewhere to put up, and something to put up with. And appreciate those positive moments that popped up, if they did.

'So what brings you up here?' Plant asked.

'I told you I'd be coming.'

'Indeed you did. But not why.'

'Why? Oh, why? The city has lost its charm.'

'For you.'

'For a lot of people, not just me.'

'True enough,' Plant agreed.

'The inner city. And the outer city. And the middle city. All of it. By dialectical deduction the place to be, therefore, is the country. QED. Who do I know in the country? Plant, of course, snug in the seclusion of his lantana farm in the Valley of the Weed. He'll huff and puff no doubt,

Plant, like he always does, complain that his solitude is valuable to him, his peace absolutely essential, but after a couple of joints he usually calms down. So here I am.'

'How long've you been working on that little speech?'

'Most of the way up.'

'Very creative.'

'You've got to ask why.'

'Why?'

'When they built the motorways in Britain, they used volumes and volumes of Mills and Boon romances as landfill in the foundations. Imagine. What sort of vibe would your tyres pick up from them? So you've got to ask, what sort of foundations did they use for the Pacific Motorway?'

'No idea, actually,' Plant said.

'Nor me. But what if it was books?'

'You're thinking of excavating them?'

'That's an idea.'

'Or selling your stock to one of the construction companies.'

'That's a good one, too. Let's have a smoke first to think about it,' he said, producing a ready-rolled one from his shirt pocket.

'If you insist,' Plant agreed.

'So what are you working on?' Fullalove asked.

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? That's not good.'

'It's fine,' Plant said. He hated being told that things about his life were not good. He knew that. He just didn't want other people to tell him.

'What you been doing?' Fullalove persisted.

'Not much.'

'Doesn't sound good.'

'It's fine,' Plant said again. And then, to Fullalove's sub-vocal grunts,

he added, 'I found an interesting bookshop.'

'Really? Interesting? That's hard to believe.'

'Second-hand.'

'Really? And it's really interesting?'

'Really.'

'You're not just saying that?'

Plant grinned to himself. Discreetly. Get Fullalove off his, Plant's, case, and focus the attention on Fullalove's failures. Or if not exactly failures, unfulfilled promises, far from scintillating successes. Like his dodgy books bookselling business that had still not got operational. And now he'd caught his interest. A bookshop. Just reel him in.

'Tell me about it.'

'Not much to tell. Just a bookshop.'

'Anything that would interest me?'

'Dunno. Probably. Lots of stock.'

'My sort of stuff?'

'I wasn't really looking. Not for anything specific.'

'You're supposed to be an investigator.'

'I wasn't investigating anything. I just sort of ran across it.'

'Useless,' Fullalove lamented.

'Just go up there and have a look,' Plant said. 'Check it out. You might find stuff.'

'Maybe,' Fullalove said. 'You trying to get rid of me already?'

'Worth a try,' Plant said.

Chapter Six

Fullalove sat out on the deck with a morning cup of tea and a morning smoke.

'This tea tastes funny,' he said.

'Seems all right to me,' Plant said.

'No it's not. It's the water.'

'It's pure rain water,' Plant said. 'It's not mains water with all that fluoride and chlorine and who knows what else in it.'

'I never drink mains water.'

'So what's wrong with pure rain water?'

'It's not pure, is it? It falls down through the atmosphere, how can it be? Saturated with toxic emissions and aviation fuel and bushfire smoke. Together with agricultural chemicals and herbicides blown across in dust storms from inland. It washes all that shit that's settled on your roof down into your tank.'

'Fair enough.'

'Apart from which, it's not secure.'

'What isn't secure?'

'Your rainwater tank. Anyone could slip anything into it.'

'Like what?'

'LSD, arsenic, dead pigeons, man-made viruses.'

'Who would want to do that?'

'They might not want to, they might just feel they had to.'

'What are you saying, Fullalove?'

'I'm just saying, be warned. You're wide open to attack with an unprotected tank.'

'And how do I protect it?'

Fullalove shrugged. 'Probably impossible.'

'So what do you want me to do?'

'Nothing, mate, nothing. I'll pick up some mineral water.'

'Feel free,' Plant said, dismissively, his self-sufficient, environmentally-

friendly rain water collecting impugned. He loved to hear the rain pattering on the corrugated iron roof, collecting in the guttering and gurgling down the down-pipes. It was economically and ecologically ideal. It cost nothing, except when it ran out and he had to order a tanker delivery. And there was nothing wrong with its taste. Bugger Fullalove.

Fullalove tossed what was left of his cup of tea onto the grass and disappeared into the spare bedroom he occupied, coming back with a hairy woollen beanie, a surgical mask and a pair of heavy-duty sunglasses.

'Combat gear?' Plant enquired.

'Yep.'

'They say masks don't do any good.'

'Of course they say that. You know why? You know why they stopped making mask-wearing compulsory?'

'No.'

'Because it meant that all the facial-recognition surveillance systems they've installed weren't going to be any use any more. There they all were, set up to cover every step you take down the street and in every shop, don't even need a tip off or a warrant to follow you and check you out. All that investment and then, pow! no full faces for the cameras to recognize any more. Not with everyone wearing masks. So, better that people keep on catching and spreading Covid and dying, than not being able to track them. So they start saying masks aren't effective.'

'And that means fewer people to track if they keep dying off,' Plant suggested brightly.

Fullalove was dismissive.

'There's no limit to the number of people they can track. As long as they can see their faces. So to make sure they can see their faces, they've stopped making masks mandatory.'

'I never saw the problem about wearing a mask,' Plant said. 'What's so hard about wearing a mask? People wear sunglasses all the time. They all have things stuck in their ears to hear their phones or whatever, I

don't see why people were complaining.'

'Most people weren't complaining,' Fullalove said. 'The complaints were from government men. And women. And transgenders. All on the payroll to protest about wearing masks.'

'So it wasn't a real opposition.'

'What do you think?'

Plant didn't know what he thought. He knew what Fullalove thought. Eventually he'd no doubt be thinking the same thing. But at the present moment he hadn't really thought about it at all.

'You should've,' Fullalove said.

'No doubt. Anyway, I'm thinking about it now. Starting to, anyway.'

Fullalove grunted.

'So you're going to keep on wearing a mask on principle?'

'You bet,' Fullalove agreed.

'What principle?'

'Health and safety.'

'Meaning safety from surveillance.'

'Sure thing.'

'What sort of mask?'

'Good point. You don't want to get some fancy, custom-made number. Or a top-of-the-line one. Not something that makes you as distinguishable and recognizable as if you weren't wearing one. No, just some generic, anonymous bland mask like this one. Thick enough so the cameras can't see through it.'

'And the virus can't get through either. Or isn't that a worry?'

'It's a worry, all right. Once they tell you there's no need to wear a mask, you've got to suspect there is. Remember, never believe anything until it's officially denied. So keep out the viruses, too. And protect yourself from the secret state.'

'You reckon the secret state spread it?'

'Like AIDS? Who knows? But one thing I do know is that the secret state will be with us and active, long after the viruses have died out.

That's the one you've got to worry about. There's no vaccination against the secret state. So keep wearing a mask.'

'I guess so,' Plant agreed.

'The surveillance state,' Fullalove intoned, almost sang. 'Why do you think the French banned that Muslim women's head-covering? Because it fucked up their facial recognition programme. Nothing to do with being anti-Muslim or pro women's rights. That's just a diversion. The real issue is control, total surveillance.

'Up till now the only safe protection was to wear a motorcycle helmet. But that gets too noticeable. And banks and places make you take it off. But masks, they're brilliant, and together with a range of hats and shades and scarves, that's all you need. Fucks them up totally. For the moment, anyway. No sense in being over-confident. The technology's always being developed. X-ray cameras next, maybe. Never mind the radiation hazards. But in the short term, masks and hats and shades it is.

'Surveillance capitalism,' Fullalove intoned. 'On the roads, in the streets, inside and outside banks, supermarkets, CCTV, dash-cams, mobile phones, everywhere. Wall-to-wall coverage. Along with internet surveillance, all your emails, all your internet searches, all your online payments, all your credit card details. Plus your mobile phone records and the tracking data on where you are and where you've been.'

'Anything else?' Plant asked.

'Drones, of course. Hovering over your back yard and looking through your windows. And where are you in all this? What access does the humble research assistant and investigative reporter have to all this data?'

'Not a lot,' Plant said. 'Pretty much none at all.'

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove assured him. 'The day of the independent private eye is over. Now it's the world of the public eye – satellites, CCTV, traffic cameras, dash-cams, drone footage. What access does a private eye have to all that? Let alone to DNA forensics. What future do you think you've got?'

'Doesn't sound like I've got any,' Plant said. 'Or any present either,' he added.

With woollen beanie pulled down to his eyebrows and his mask reaching from beneath his chin to above his nose, only Fullalove's eyes were visible. He covered them with a pair of wrap-around, thick-framed sunglasses.

His face may have been obscured, indeed it was, but the overall effect was quite distinctive. Plant considered remarking on the fact, but decided not to. Maybe it was the wrap-around sunglasses that seemed too suspicious. Maybe the answer was to wear ordinary, prescription spectacles, maybe with thick enough or lightly tinted lenses to conceal the eyes from the recognition software. But not those heavy-duty wrap-arounds and the hairy beanie. Might as well wear an eye-patch and carry a parrot on your shoulder.

Fullalove was back within the hour, struggling up the slope to the house with a cellophane-wrapped six-pack of large plastic bottles in each arm. Mount Warning mineral water.

'You just bought it for the name,' Plant said.

'No, mate, it tastes good and its local. Health and safety first.'

'Really? But it's not just that, is it? You like the name, it turns you on.'

'No, really …' Fullaove protested.

'"Oh, for that warning voice,"' Plant intoned.

Fullalove grinned, something so disturbing to many people that they forbore ever to tell him jokes.

'There is that,' he conceded.

'Obviously.'

'Mount Warning, to your health,' Fullalove declaimed, holding up the bottle as in a toast. 'It's not bossing you around or telling you what to do, like the national broadcaster. It doesn't say be vigilant, get frightened, be prepared. It's just letting you know. Mount Warning. A reminder. Be warned. It's up to you to figure out what you need to be warned about.'

‘You believe that?’
‘There’s always something you need to be warned about.’

Chapter Seven

'I might check out this bookshop,' Fullalove said, when he'd made a fresh cup of tea with the mineral water, and drunk it, and had another smoke. Revitalized. He fiddled around in his wallet, checking that he had any money in case he decided to buy a book or two. Rearranged his beanie, mask and sun-glasses. Headed for his ute.

'Good idea,' Plant said, envisaging a morning to himself.

Fullalove combed through the bookshop's stock. And there was a lot of it. There was nothing he was specifically looking for. But if he could find something that fitted into one of his categories of the unacceptable, he would probably snap it up. Assuming it was at a good price. Meaning cheap. He enjoyed browsing. He liked to check out the opposition and be reassured that there was no one doing what he was doing, no one focusing on the unacceptable, the cancelled. He was happy when he found nothing. No opposition. And not unhappy if he found nothing that he'd want to purchase. After all, he had plenty of stock, more than enough. The problem now was moving it. Polite talk for selling it.

There were none of Fullalove's staples. None of the great Marxist classics, no copies of *The Communist Manifesto*, or *Capital* or *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, not in Everyman's Library or Penguin editions, let alone from Progress Publishers, Moscow, or the Foreign Languages Publishing House, Peking. No *Mein Kampf* let alone *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. No *Ten Little Niggers*, though there was its reissue with the sanitized title, *And Then There Were None*. No *Nigger of the Narcissus*. Not even *Black Beauty.*

It wasn't that Fullalove had a list that he carried around with him. Certainly not a file accessible from a phone. He didn't carry a phone. Or carry print versions of those sorts of lists. But he had pretty well memorized all the one time or another cancelled and suppressed and excoriated and banned and taboo, from *The Well of Loneliness* to *The*

Rainbow, from *Fanny Hill* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, from *Tropic of Cancer* to *Beautiful Losers*. *Fanny Hill* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Lolita* were there, together with *Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn* and *The Ginger Man*. Sexual variety was well catered for. It was just the full-on political extremism that was absent.

Except that it wasn't just the political. He wasn't surprised to find that absent. It was generally missing from the second-hand shops he checked out and he was never surprised. But it was the absence of dope books that did surprise him. No William Burroughs's *Junky*. No Burroughs at all. No Fitz Hugh Ludlow's *The Hashish Eater*. No Anna Kavan. No Alexander Trocchi. He found Louisa Alcott's *Little Women*, but not her story 'Perilous Play'. He knew the classic titles by heart. Some somewhat esoteric, certainly. Some probably rare. But some had been around in mass market paperbacks, like *The Doors of Perception* and *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. There were no copies of any of them here. Nor *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross,* nor *Soma*. Nor the definitive *Opium and the Romantic Imagination*.

It was another potentially profitable line he had been collecting. The sort of books you might prefer to acquire anonymously. But up here? In the Valley of the Weed? Surely this would have been the place to find them. Maybe they turned over rapidly and they'd all been sold. But they certainly weren't here.

'I had a look at that bookshop of yours,' Fullalove said when he got back.

'Not mine,' Plant said.

'The one you searched out.'

'The one I blundered across.'

'Same difference.'

'Looking for tips on what to stock? Or what not to stock?'

'Not tips, no. I don't need tips on what to stock. I just need tips on how to get it moving. But I had a look round and there's something about it.'

'Like what?'

'The stock's been sanitized,' Fullalove said.

'What do you mean?'

'Sanitized.'

'Probably because of Covid. They probably sprayed disinfectant around. Handling second-hand books, who knows what you could pick up?'

'I don't mean that sort of sanitized.'

'What other sort is there?'

'I think they've been pruning out stuff.'

'What sort of stuff?'

'The sort of stuff I stock. The unacceptable.'

'What sort of unacceptable?'

'No hard line politics. No dope books.'

'Really? Are you sure?'

'Sure am. I checked out the shelves. Shelf by bloody shelf. No Marx, no Mao, no marijuana. No left, no rabid right, no dope books.'

'Maybe there's a demand for dope books up here.'

'They wouldn't all have gone. There'd be something.'

'Yeah. Maybe. I guess so.'

'So why aren't there any?'

'No idea,' Plant said. 'You tell me.'

'They're up to something. They're playing it safe. Don't want any complaints. Don't want anyone checking them out.'

'You just did.'

'Like law enforcement or whatever. They're trying to look squeaky clean. Always a dodgy look.'

'Not that squeaky clean. Lots of sex stuff.'

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove said. 'But not the stuff that matters.'

'Like politics, conspiracies and drugs,' Plant offered. Sardonically.

'Exac'ly. I'm going back up there. Check out what's going on.'

'Don't you think you're overreacting?'

'Overreacting?'

'Over interpreting.'

'Naaah. You get a nose for these things. And there's this chick working there. I'm going to check her out.'

'Who, Lucy?'

'What, you know her?'

'Sure,' Plant said.

He enjoyed the sensation of knowing something, something that Fullalove didn't know, and then telling him.

'So that's why you've gone soft on the place. Because you've got the hots for the chick working there.'

'I knew her years ago. She's no chick.'

'Appealing, though. Maybe she's not a chick, but she's not some old boiler fowl.'

'Well ...'

'Sexy. Up for it.'

'I don't know about that,' Plant said, and indeed he didn't.

'But you're hopeful nonetheless.'

'Not at all.'

'I've heard that one before. "Not at all." But don't worry, mate. I'm not going to cramp your style. I won't even admit to knowing you.'

'I thought you never admitted to knowing anyone on principle.'

'Yeah, well, I'll be extra non-admitting. Deny you even exist.'

'I was just talking to her.'

'A hallucination. She imagined it. Anyway I won't enter into any discussion about whether you exist or not. I just want to do a double-check on their stock. Just to make sure.'

'Make sure about what?'

'Don't know yet. But something. No doubt about that.'

'No doubt about the unknown?'

'Never any doubt about the unknown,' Fullalove said, enigmatically.

At least it seemed enigmatically to Plant, who had no idea what

Fullalove meant. Except that he was going back to the bookshop.

Except that he wasn't. Not immediately.

'Tell you what,' Fullalove said, 'give me a loan of your laptop and I'll check them out online. Save having to drive back up there. Have a careful look through their stock list.'

'You can't.'

'What do you mean, I can't? You won't let me use it. Afraid I'll have a look into your intimate online correspondence?'

'I don't have any intimate online correspondence.'

'That's what they all say. Maybe you should.'

'No thank you.'

'So what's the problem?'

'They don't have an online stock list.'

'They what? What do you mean?'

'What I said. They don't have an online catalogue.'

'I don't believe it.'

'So have a look.'

'So how do they get any business if you can't buy their books online?'

'Isn't that your problem?'

Fullalove's problem was indeed exactly that. He had been accumulating a huge stock of books deemed unacceptable: politics, sex, economics, history. Books people wanted to access, but didn't want anyone to know they had accessed them. They were all probably available online but downloading them would be recorded and monitored. So hard copies were preferable. You could read a printed book without a trace. But Fullalove had so far not solved the problem of building in secure anonymity for purchasers. There was no problem if people simply walked into a shop or whatever, and paid cash. No CCTV monitoring, assure them of that. No transaction record. No credit cards. But buying online was now the basic procedure for the second-hand book trade. It wasn't just that shop rentals were too high, they were too high, but listing your stock online and getting paid by credit card or PayPal was

now the regular way to go. As long as you didn't mind the fact that your purchases were then automatically recorded and traceable. The whole point of Fullalove's brainchild was anonymity of purchase. Nothing was to be recorded. And there was no way of securing that online. Yet could he rely on simply running the business from a shop, relying on people calling in, like they used to years ago? Would that provide sufficient sales, was that going to be economically feasible? So far he didn't think so.

Fullalove checked out the shop online.

'You're right, you know,' he said.

'Of course I'm right,' said Plant, 'I've already looked.'

'Very dodgy. I'm going to have to go back up there.'

'You reckon?'

'Yep. Definitely. There's something going on. Maybe it's your lady friend there, you reckon she's up to something? What would she be up to?'

Almost anything, Plant surmised. Suspected. But said nothing.

'You want to come along?'

Plant stalled. Yes, he wouldn't mind seeing Lucy again. In fact he would quite like to, but in the company of Fullalove, possibly not. Fullalove's presence tended to alienate and discourage people, inhibit conversation, generate anxiety.

'I'll pass,' he said.

Chapter Eight

There was nobody in the shop when Fullalove arrived except Lucy, sitting behind the counter reading a book. She laid it down flat on its cover so that he couldn't see the title, and smiled at him. He nodded back and began nosing around the shop again. He'd looked through it before out of bookish interest, general curiosity. Now he examined it with suspicion. And his suspicions were confirmed. Sanitized in the areas of politics, economics and drugs, a liberal free-for-all in terms of sex.

He didn't especially want any new purchases until he'd started moving his stock. Actually selling some. So he was happy enough not presenting anything to Lucy to buy. Instead he took the opportunity to raise a few questions as he left.

'I tried to check you out online,' he said. 'Don't you have a stock list?'

Lucy smiled and shook her head.

'Why's that?'

'Well, no one's ever got round to doing it. It's just not cost efficient. It would take too long. Cost you more than most of the books are worth to catalogue and list and describe every one of them. And then to delete the listing when the book is sold, assuming you can remember to. You'd have to keep a record of every transaction, write down every title.'

'That's how it works,' Fullalove said, blandly.

'Not here it doesn't,' she said. 'We don't have the staff to do it. Look around. Can you see anyone?'

He could see neither staff nor customers.

'You don't feel you're missing out on sales?'

'Probably,' she said. 'But we're doing all right as it is.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'Your lady friend's shop,' Fullalove said.

'She's not my lady friend,' Plant said.

'No, sure, but that apart ...'

'You can't just say "but that apart"'

'I can and I just did.'

'You're impossible.'

'It's been said before.'

'Everything's been said before.'

'Oh, we're into cultural decline now, are we? Global warming and the death of the novel.'

Sometimes, Plant reflected, there was no point in trying to say anything. And this was one of them.

'I had a talk to her,' Fullalove said. 'Very strange. No online business.'

'I already told you that.'

'Never hurts to get things confirmed.'

Plant sniffed. 'Anyway,' he pointed out, 'that's the way you want to run your operation, isn't it?'

'Sure. But I have a reason. And a very good one. Preserving anonymity. What's hers?'

'Well, your reason is dodgy because you're trying to sell dodgy books.'

'So what's her dodgy reason?'

'I don't know. Did you ask her?'

'Of course. Not cost efficient, she said.'

'Probably true. It's all laid back up here. You don't have to digitize everything and spend your life on the internet. It's the Valley of the Weed.'

'Exac'ly.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning I don't know what. But she's up to something.'

'That's what she said about me,' Plant said. 'But I'm not up to anything. I'm ...'

'Bored. Yes. You said. But you can still be up to something even if you're bored. Probably especially.'

'If only.'

Fullalove eyed him suspiciously. But Fullalove eyed the whole world suspiciously. There was nothing personal in that.

'She's up to something.'

'Like what?'

'Well, censoring the stock for a start.'

'Censoring?'

'They can't just take everything they're offered, they'd be swamped.'

'Obviously,' Plant said.

'So someone has to go through new stock and prune and purge it. Has to be pruned anyway, always a lot of the junk you can't sell when you buy someone's collection, dirty damaged copies, too many multiples. Don't want them cluttering up the shop. And while doing that someone tosses out the stuff they're not going to stock. Like dope books. Hard-line politics.'

'All the stuff you're specializing in.'

'Exac'ly. I've got a list in my head of all the stuff I need to get, and the stock I've got. Authors, titles. And pretty well none of it features on your bimbo's shelves.'

'She's not ...'

'I know, not your bimbo. But the point I'm making is, not any of those books.'

'Those books?'

'The one's you'd want to buy.'

'The ones *you* want to buy.'

'Both of us.'

'So what are they doing with them?'

'Defoliation.'

'Defoliation?'

'A cultural spin off of what they did in Vietnam. Stripping off the leaves and destroying them like they destroyed the forests. Ripping out the pages and tearing them up. Shredding them. What else do you want

to call it?'

'I don't know. Could be.'

'Well, where else are all those books? On any random selection some of them would be there.'

'So what's going on?'

'Good question.'

'And?'

'We just need to find the answer.'

'Go on then.'

'I've got a few ideas.'

'And?'

'They're maturing.'

Plant groaned. Quietly. Not a protest. Just a recognition.

'You want to buy the stuff that gets thrown out? You're going to make an offer?'

'Nice idea. But I don't think they'd be into selling it, somehow.'

'What about sex?' Plant asked. It sounded like a teenager's cry. He embarrassed himself. But he disregarded Fullalove's suggestive chuckle. 'It's the third staple of your book stock. So what about it?'

'Yeah, there's lots of sex,' Fullalove said. 'Can never get too much. In books, that is,' he added.

'But not your other two categories. So what does that suggest?'

'That she likes sex, but not politics or dope.'

'And what does that suggest?'

'Dunno, offhand. But it must suggest something, mustn't it? Something dodgy.'

'It's not that Lucy's not into dope.'

'Is that so?'

Plant nodded. 'Used to be, anyway.'

'And sex, she into that?'

Plant shrugged.

'Didn't you ask her? What did she say?'

'No, I didn't ask her.'

'You knew already?'

Plant said nothing. Fullalove shook his head gently, wearily.

'You remain a mystery to me, Plant.'

'Thank heavens for that,' Plant said.

'The way I look at it,' Fullalove said, 'is that that shop's up to something and obviously doesn't want any trouble.'

'Who does?' Plant asked.

'I thought trouble was your business.'

'I'm resting.'

'Well get active again. We need to find out what's going on. Why the significant absences? Dope. Marxism. Fascism. Populism.'

'The staple of your stock.'

'So it's trying to look squeaky clean.'

'And sexy. Sexy books.'

'And sexy.'

'So?'

'So what's it up to? I'm going to have to go back up there again.'

Chapter Nine

Mid-morning the sun beat down on the Gold Coast streets, heating up the walls and roofs and roads and pavements so that the heat was like a solid front that pressed against you as you walked into it. But the shop was dark, gloomy even, after the brightness outside, a welcome twilight, just enough light to make out the books' titles on their spines, the artificial lighting in the shop dim and sporadic. And it was comparatively cool, maybe the books lining the walls provided a layer of insulation, maybe there was a hidden, discreet, air-conditioning unit somewhere.

Fullalove looked round the shelves as on the previous times, and as on the previous times made the same observations. Sex apart, there were no dodgy titles, none of his basic stock in trade. He browsed around for a while looking for something safely bland to purchase. Something that would offer no clue as to his preferences and interests. No politics or crime or current affairs. Fiction preferably. He picked up a P.G. Wodehouse paperback, surely innocuous enough.

He was preparing to head to the counter and ask Lucy a few more questions when the door opened and someone walked in. He heard Lucy call out 'Hello', and a male voice responding. Fullalove edged along a row of shelves and peered out at the two of them.

'Good Lord, it's Fullalove. Heavens above,' the male voice said, spotting him lurking there immediately, who else would be wearing a beanie, wrap around shades and a mask? A male maybe ten or fifteen years older than Fullalove, smiling face, neat grey hair, clean-shaven, average height, confident stance. Well dressed as far as Fullalove could assess, casual cotton trousers not crumpled, country-style check shirt with sleeves rolled up to just below the elbow, not a short-sleeved Queensland style, polished brown Oxford shoes, not a white shoe or trainer type.

'Fancy finding you here after all these years. Well, well, well.'

Lucy looked across in wide-eyed interest.

'Osbourne,' Fullalove said, tentatively. Not questioningly, he knew who it was. 'What are you doing up here?'

'Me? Here?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I could ask the same about you.'

'You go first,' Fullalove said.

'Well, I own the place.'

'What, the Gold Coast?'

'Ah, that wit, how I remember it. No, my old comedian, this bookshop.'

'You own this place?'

'Cannot tell a lie.'

Fullalove rather doubted that. More than rather.

'I thought you'd gone into publishing.'

'Been there, done that. Got out while the going was good.'

'Got out where?'

'Take the money and run, I always say. Became an agent for a while.'

'An agent? What sort of agent?'

'A literary agent. What else did you have in mind?'

'Really?'

'Yes, really.'

'And that's what you're up to here? Now? An agent?'

He gave the word a heavy stress.

'No, no. Packed all that in, took a good package and bought this place.'

'The bookshop. Not the Gold Coast.'

'The bookshop.'

'So you own this bookshop?'

'Sure do.'

'Really.'

'Yes, really.'

It shook Fullalove. The dodgy stock. Now the dodgy owner. He

would have to be dodgy. It was all beyond Fullalove's immediate comprehension. In the meantime the less said about the stock, or indeed about anything else, the better. Think about it all later.

'So you packed it all in and just sell other people's books now.'

'I always sold other people's books. That's what being a publisher or an agent involves.'

'But you're out of publishing now.'

'Actually, I'm not.'

Bluff, genial, what they used to call well-spoken, Osbourne beamed across at Fullalove. Lucy beamed too. Outside, Osbourne's all-wheel-drive, all electric Beemer probably beamed along with them.

'Oh,' Fullalove said, and left it at that. Let Osbourne fill in the detail.

'Might interest you, actually, come to think of it. If you haven't given up the writing game.'

'Yeah?' Fullalove offered, interrogatively.

'Yes. Got a little operation going on the web. Never know, it might appeal to you.'

'What sort of operation?'

'Oh, you know, what they used to call a journal of opinion.'

'What, on the web?'

'Yes.'

'But not in print?'

'Forget print.'

'Really?' Fullalove said, turning his head round slowly to look at the print encrusted walls and shelves, print bound and preserved.

Osbourne smiled back.

'I made the transition.'

It sounded to Fullalove like something from one of the New Age cults up round the Northern Rivers. What they used to call New Age back in the old days.

'I saw the way things were going. Move now or forever hold your peace. So I made the transition. Got out in time. Gave up print and

paper and entered the modern world. One of those historic moments.'

'But you've still got a shop full of all these books.'

'We're in an age of transition,' Osbourne said. 'I try to bridge the divide.'

'What divide's that?'

'Between print and digital. So I have a foot in both camps. Books here, internet there.'

'Where's there?'

'The world wide web, where else?"

'So, what, you've revived the old street paper you used to own and put it on the web?'

'Part-owned. And that you used to write for.'

'Till you sacked me.'

'Till the editor sacked you, not me.'

'I was the editor,' Fullalove said.

'The managing editor sacked you.'

'And nothing to do with you.'

'Absolutely not. Editorial autonomy.'

'Pull the other one.'

'It's the truth.'

Fullalove laughed. His hollow laugh.

'So what happened to his autonomy when he got sacked a couple of weeks later?'

'More than a couple of weeks,' Osbourne said.

Fullalove grunted. It was no answer. Nor was grunting, but it didn't deserve more.

'So you've gone and started it again.'

'No, no, not at all. That's ancient history. This is all bran new.'

'What's it called?'

'*Mad, Bad, and Dangerous*.'

'What?'

'What Lady Caroline Lamb said about Lord Byron.'

'Why?' Fullalove asked.

'I thought it was a nice touch.'

'What was?'

'The allusion to Byron.'

'Byron Bay was named after Byron's cousin, not after the poet.'

'Of course. Just an allusion. And it sets the tone.'

'What tone?'

'The tone we're aiming for. What about it?'

'What about what?'

'Can I tempt you?'

Lucy smiled invitingly. She was blessed with an inviting smile. Or cursed. She smiled, anyway.

'Tempt me?'

'To offer your talents as a contributor.'

Fullalove moved his jaw and licked his teeth.

'We pay,' Osbourne said.

'Sure,' Fullalove said.

Osbourne took his wallet from his pocket. An advance, Fullalove chortled to himself in surprise. And prematurely. Osbourne took out a business card and handed it across.

'Drop by the office some time and have a chat. Check it out online and see what you think.'

'Sure,' Fullalove said again.

Osbourne beamed at him. Fullalove beamed back.

Back in print at last. Digital print, but still words. Words, words, words.

It didn't seem quite the time to begin an interrogation about the shop's apparent exclusion policy. Best to hand over his purchase quietly and go away and have a think. He put the book down on the counter and Lucy began to ring up the price on the till.

'No, no,' Osbourne said, picking it up and waving to Lucy to stop the transaction and to Fullalove to put his wallet away.

'Good Lord,' he said, 'I'd never have spotted you for a P.G. Wodehouse

sort of chap. More of a Robert Ludlum aficionado, I would've thought. But there again, there is all that strife Plum got into with his World War II broadcasts when he was interned.'

He handed the book over.

'That's very generous of you,' Fullalove said.

Osbourne beamed agreement, clasped an arm around Fullalove's shoulder, and shepherded him to the door. 'What's old acquaintance for?' he asked.

Fullalove wasn't sure of the answer to that one, so said nothing.

'Have a think about it. Give us a call. No hurry,' Osbourne said. 'Whenever it feels right to write.'

'Right to write', what did that mean? If anything.

Fullalove stood on the hot pavement, nodding vague agreement. Osbourne was already back inside and the door closed.

Chapter Ten

Fullalove returned from his third foray to the bookshop, having stopped on the way back and bought marzipan, Dutch almond fingers, Greek halva, Belgian chocolate biscuits, and half a dozen packets of cigarette papers and half a dozen bottles of Mount Warning mineral water. He deposited them on the table like Drake unloading the booty from a fleet of Spanish galleons. Plant watched with silent amazement, such largesse uncharacteristic of Fullalove. And then he felt uncharitable, thinking such thoughts, true as they were. Anyway, largesse, celebration, get stuck into it.

'You wouldn't believe it,' Fullalove said, speed-rolling a smoke.

'I thought you claimed you could believe anything.'

'I wouldn't've believed this, though.'

'Believed what?'

Fullalove lit up and inhaled and held his breath. Plant waited in silence.

'The temptation,' Fullalove. 'Writing. You get sucked in. Someone gives you the space to reveal your deepest thoughts. A soapbox to proclaim your revelations from.'

Back in the recesses of time Fullalove had written. Proclaimed his revelations and revealed his deepest thoughts, or some of them, in editorial and front-page splashes.

'I was a writer once,' Fullalove said, as if Plant didn't know. He was telling him anyway.

'I held forth,' he said.

'Yes.'

'Editorials. Op-ed. You name it, I did it.'

'Advertorial,' Plant offered.

'No I fucking never did advertorial,' Fullalove snapped. Integrity impugned. Surrender to corporate pressure alleged. 'No fucking way.'

Plant grinned. 'And then you were fired.'

'Yes.'

'For refusing advertorial assignments.'

'No. Though could be. Could've been an underlying cause.'

'Like pre-existing health issues that make you vulnerable to viruses.'

'Maybe.'

'Not just getting the wrong answer in one of your inspired denunciations.'

'It wasn't a wrong answer. It was just one they didn't like.'

'They being?'

'They being the owners.'

'And what became of them?'

'Yeah, well, amazing really. The bloke I dealt with, well more a chap than a bloke ....'

He tailed off.

'Yes?'

'He's still around. Back in business again. Amazing.'

Plant offered monosyllabic inquiry, innocent, open to any interpretation.

'And?'

'Yeah, well,' Fullalove said. Muttered. Not exactly shamefaced, shamefaced was not in his repertoire. But without the full-on blast of journalistic denunciation.

'And he's offered you a job.'

'How did you know?'

'I'm an investigator.'

'You're a glorified research assistant.'

'Same difference. And thanks for the glorified. Much appreciated.'

'Yeah, well, anyway. So I'm about to return to my old profession.'

Plant looked at him dubiously.

'Which one would that be?'

'Have there been so many? Surely not? I am once again becoming a gentleman of the press.'

'Gentleman?' Plant asked. 'Since when have you been a gentleman?'

'Hey!' Fullalove wailed, offended, or purporting to be.

'Not a category you've ever approved of,' Plant went on.

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Gentleman of the press! What century are you sleeping in?'

'Do I have a choice?' Fullalove asked.

'Gentleman of the press,' Plant repeated, 'gentlemen of the press,' varying its number as if that might clarify things. 'So where is this bloke? Who would ever employ you?'

'Hey!' Fullalove wailed again, his dignity assailed.

'I don't mean that negatively, necessarily.'

'Oh, ah, well,' Fullalove said. 'So how do you mean it?'

'Well, you know.'

'No I don't know, that's why I'm asking.'

'Well, you know.'

'You already said that.'

'Yeah, well, you know – no, let me finish – I mean the point is, who would ever employ either of us in the press any more? There isn't any press any more. And for what there is you've got to be a woman. Or ethnic. And young. Pretty much a teenager. They take you on as an intern, all smiling fulfilment of diversity quotas and no need to pay you anything. Or not much. Then at the end of the year they let you go and they take on a new batch of media studies graduates.'

'Yeah, well,' Fullalove said, yet once more. 'Anyway, he offered me a job.'

'So what's the problem? Don't you want a job? You've already got a job?'

'No, no, that's not it,' Fullalove said, whatever 'it' might have been.

'It's tempting, but it might compromise your integrity?' Plant said.

'Something like that.'

'Integrity,' Plant said. He laughed. It was the sort of word that could usually provoke some contemptuous deconstruction from Fullalove.

Fullalove just grunted.

'Or are you afraid of what you might end up saying? The temptation of truth-telling?'

'Yeah.'

'And the unfortunate consequences thereof.'

'Disastrous.'

'Disastrous?'

'Forget unfortunate.'

'Substitute cataclysmic?'

'Something like that.'

'Cataclysmic,' Plant said.

'Exac'ly.'

'So how come? Your talents have been belatedly recognized? Or he can't find anybody else? Or they're looking for a fall guy?'

'You've said it,' Fullalove said.

'But which?'

'You're the investigator.'

'So where did you meet this guy?'

'Have a guess.'

'Just tell me,' Plant said.

'You'd never guess.'

'No. And I'm not going to.'

Fullalove waited while the kookaburras delivered a chorus of cackles from the trees.

'He owns your lady friend's bookshop.'

'He what?'

'He owns your ...'

'Yes, I heard.'

Fullalove grinned.

'Thought that would tickle your fancy,' he said, from his thesaurus of inappropriate idioms.

'She's not my lady friend,' Plant felt the need to clarify again.

'What, not the bimbo from Mullumbimboland? The banger from Bangalow? The Currumbin crumpet? Or the bit of tail from Brunswick Heads. Or even Ocean's Whores? I know, I know,' Fullalove said, fending off the protests that Plant hadn't bothered to make, 'sounds bad, totally unacceptable. But it's all part of our cultural heritage, word play, sex play, should be buried maybe but not forgotten, how we used to be, and you have to get it out of your head otherwise it all hangs there, day after day, resonating, inexpressible, the forbidden. Word play, word play, back in print again.

'Incidentally,' Fullalove added in his usual, familiar, insinuating way, there being nothing incidental about his query, 'have they got something going, do you reckon?'

'Who?'

'Your lady friend and Osbourne, who else?'

'No idea.'

'I thought you'd been checking the place out.'

'The place, not the people.'

'Same difference.'

'Not to me.'

'You sweet on her or something?'

'Not sure what I make of her.'

'But you could still be sweet on her.'

Plant said nothing.

'I take that silence in the affirmative,' Fullalove said.

'You're an annoying, needling bastard sometimes,' Plant said.

'Don't say things like that. People will think I'm a junky.'

'I doubt that people think of you at all,' Plant said. Rather a good response, he thought. And then, to get Fullalove off the topic, he asked, 'So, have you taken this job?'

'You're the investigator. You tell me, do I want to do it again?'

'I don't know,' Plant said. 'Do you?'

Fullalove sighed. Not something he did that often.

'Maybe. Maybe not.'

'Well that about covers the options.'

'Yeah,' Fullalove said.

Though did it?

'So, they're not going to make you editor again,' Plant said, suppressing the surely he nearly added.

Fullalove screwed up his face in one of those screwing up your face movements. Not exactly gestures.

'No,' he conceded. 'Naaah,' he added, as if reflectively, adjusting the idiom.

'So you're doing what?'

'Words, words, words.'

'Ah,' Plant registered. 'A bit of this, a bit of that.'

'We'll see,' Fullalove said. 'Or there again, we might not.'

'Incidentally,' Fullalove said, 'while I was keeping an eye on your lady love ...'

'She is not my lady love,' Plant said, wearily. He wouldn't have minded so much if she had been, rather liked the idea.

'Whatever. But what I noticed was that she was keeping an eye on me.'

'Fair enough,' Plant said. 'She probably thought you were trying to steal a book. Several books, maybe. So you were both peering at each other through the gaps in the shelves?'

'Pretty much. So what's with her? How do you know her?'

'Her old man hired me.'

'And? What was he up to?'

'He was an academic. Specialized in magic. Medieval and modern.'

'Ah, so he was one of them. Had some spookery connections, presumably. Putting spells on dissidents. That's what they do, isn't it?'

'So a now deceased former colleague of his told me.'

'So she could've been in the business, too.'

'Not impossible,' Plant conceded.

'You ever ask her?'

'Why ask a question that you're not going to get a straight answer to?'

'So you are suspicious.'

'You know me. I'm always suspicious.'

'Me, too,' Fullalove said.

Chapter Eleven

Outside, nature was glorious. Doves cooing, cicadas chirping, frogs croaking, wallabies chewing, bees buzzing, magpies pecking. The constant activity of it all amazed Plant. Exhausted him, just registering it, listening to it. But a contented exhaustion. A day of contentment.

'You should be happy,' he said to Fullalove.

'Why's that?'

'Employed at last.'

'Oh, that.'

'Doesn't it make you happy? Send the blood coursing through your veins?'

'Not especially,' Fullalove said.

'You're a miserable sod, you know.'

'Only selectively.'

'What does that mean?'

'Only certain things make me miserable. Not even miserable. Just wary.'

'And this job's one of them?'

'Too good to be true.'

'You mean, why would anyone ever hire someone like you?'

'Something like that.'

'I can see why you'd worry.'

'Thanks for nothing.'

Plant smiled politely.

'Apart from that, I don't like the idea of an online magazine.'

'Not really your sort of thing.'

'No. But there again, if I waited for my sort of thing I'd probably wait for ever.'

'Not the sort of company you'd keep.'

'Tell me where I can find my sort of company?'

'You'd probably find it online.'

'In some sort of entrapment operation.'

'If you found someone sharing your views, you'd feel it was entrapment, is that what you're saying?'

'Pretty much.'

Plant sighed.

'And you don't like going online. You yearn for the days of printed papers. You're an old fogey, Fullalove. A Luddite. A dinosaur.'

'No. Well, yes. I just miss the papers.'

'And you can't call online papers papers any more, there's no paper involved.'

'More cancellation of the language,' Fullalove groaned.

'The only papers left are rolling papers,' Plant said, reaching out for them and rolling up a joint.

'Our cultural heritage is being wiped away.'

'It's just a word.'

'Don't you believe it.'

'Etymology.'

'Oh etymology, what crimes are committed in thy name,' Fullalove intoned.

'What about parchment, then? And vellum? Maybe you should go and reclaim that cultural heritage. You're sounding like one of those old scribes and copyists in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe lamenting the end of manuscripts. They probably complained just as bitterly about the inconvenience of reading cumbersome books. "What's wrong with scrolls and parchment? They were good enough for the Dead Sea. Who needs Gutenberg?" And the invention of writing was no doubt similarly frowned upon by the old bards who'd learned everything by heart. They must have looked on parchment and pens and ink with a distinct lack of charity. Writing, they would have predicted, will destroy our capacity for memorizing heroic poems and the myths of our ancestors. And it did.'

'Fascinating,' Fullalove said, dismissively. 'But it's not that. Not all of it. But I do.'

'Do what?'

'Prefer print and paper. Basically all electronic communication systems are surveillance systems. From the telephone onwards. You placed a call and the operator listened in. Where did they develop digitization? Bletchley Park. Code breaking in World War Two. Which they then evolved into surveillance devices. Everybody thinks it was just code breaking. But it was vastly larger than that. It was full scale communications interception. The whole lot. Developing a communications network that could be simultaneously monitored. That's why they kept the place a secret until the mid 1970s.'

'You could say the same about mail,' Plant said. 'You wrote a letter, put it in the post-box and, if the delivery destination was an address of interest, when it got to the sorting office it was sent on to the security services and steamed open and copied. Or could be ...'

'Cumbersome, though,' Fullalove said. 'All those trestle tables with huge kettles boiling away. Then they had to insert a pencil into the envelope flap and roll it gently till it opened. Wearing rubber gloves so as not to leave fingerprints. Taking care not to tear the envelope. Unless they wanted to freak out the recipients. Induce paranoia by making it look like the mail was being read. Even if it wasn't. Just opened. And left open. But it let people know that security was onto them. This was like a warning. Keep out of trouble. So for a long and happy life, lay off and lie low. And a lot probably did. Curb their activities. And so the state maintained itself. Labour intensive, though. Having to open all those envelopes.

'But with email they just have it automatically scanned for key words. Which they flag. So some fuckwit writes marijuana or bomb or jihad or underage sex or Karl Marx and that's it. Automatically registered, and those emails, sender and recipient both, are monitored ever afterwards. Or until they terminate or gaol the jolly correspondents.

'Same with search engines. Every search you make can be monitored. Is monitored, you can assume. That's why there's all this dodgy stuff

sitting out there for you to log onto. Entrapment. And what is deemed to be dodgy exceeds any worst case scenario you can come up with. Anything that confronts or challenges or queries the dominant ideas of the age. And the dominant ideas of the age are the ideas of the ruling class: market values. Any other values are a threat and need to be extirpated, along with anyone who shows any interest in them. Ideas like religion and history and literature, let alone socialism and state ownership of the means of production. Just think what's been eliminated in the last fifty years. Free tertiary education. Libraries. Family values. The Sabbath day.

'You start showing interest in any of those things in your internet searches, you immediately become a person of interest. So writing for an online magazine, every word you utter is monitored. Automatically. Routinely.'

He opened his hands, spreading his arms in some market trader's gesture.

'So.'

'So you're saying, don't use the internet, don't use the phone, don't use email, don't use the mail.'

'Pretty much,' Fullalove agreed.

'So how do you find out anything? How do you communicate? Walk in a deserted park and whisper?'

'You'd still be vulnerable to drone surveillance.'

'How could I have forgotten?' Plant asked. He tried for a sceptical, satirical note but it had no disturbing effect on Fullalove who just grinned. 'How do we know we're not being monitored now?'

'We don't,' Fullalove grinned.

'You don't have some concealed jamming device to stop our conversation from being picked up and recorded?'

Fullalove reached into his hip pocket and produced his wallet.

'Is that why you never have any money? It isn't a wallet at all, it's some electronic gizmo.'

'No,' Fullalove said. 'It's just the only thing I have in my pocket. That's

it. My wallet. Nothing else.'

'With nothing in it, neither cash nor credit card.'

'Never use a credit card, why let them track all your finances?'

'And never carry cash so you don't have to pay for anything, whoever you're with settles the bill.'

'Only if you insist,' Fullalove said. 'That's very generous of you.'

'So how do you propose to communicate?'

'Probably best not to.'

'Is that your answer?'

'Least said, soonest mended. That's why they had these old proverbs. As warnings. Whatever you say, say nothing.'

'Many a true word spoken in jest,' Plant offered.

'I'm not jesting.'

'So does that mean your words are not true?'

'"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate.'

'So how do you propose finding anything out?'

'Buy a newspaper. For cash. Go to the library and read a paper or a book there without borrowing it. And read it all with a grain of salt, or more.'

'That's pretty limited.'

'It's a start.'

There was always the phony ID library card Fullalove had. Well, a real card in some name or other than Fullalove, real or imagined. Useful for the internet in libraries. But that was taking things to another level.

'And so writing for an online magazine doesn't appeal?'

'Oh, I dunno.'

'You're flattered to be asked to write again.'

'Well, hardly flattered.'

'It's too good to be true, then?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, realistically, why would Osbourne hire you?'

'Go on, you tell me. Why not?'

'Maybe to keep an eye on you, see what you're up to, what you're thinking.'

Fullalove licked his tongue around his teeth and pondered.

'I'm flattered to be such an object of attention.'

'But you're still worried about being monitored.'

'I don't like the idea of it. I can't say I'm worried. I'm not going to self-incriminate myself just from the excitement of publication.'

'You're adept at self-censorship.'

'If you want to put it like that.'

'How would you put it?'

'I wouldn't put it.'

'Anyway, surely everything in the old print media got monitored, didn't it?'

'Eventually. But it took time. Someone had to read it all and note it down and file it. With online stuff, it's instantaneous.'

'So?'

'So nothing. You just need to realize what the realities are in the medium that you're writing for.'

'I don't think you'll have any problems about that.'

'Let's say I hope not.'

'I hope not, too,' Plant said.

Chapter Twelve

Some mornings Plant would drive down to the beach and walk along the sand, breathing in the ozone or whatever it was, watching birds dive down and fish leap up, and getting exercise. Leisurely exercise, but nonetheless involving movement. Other times he would drive down to check his post office box in Brunswick Heads. Like Fullalove, he avoided giving out the address of where he lived. And having checked that there was little or nothing in the box, he would buy an apricot Danish at the bakery. Or a jam doughnut if he felt strong enough. And eat it while he walked down the long stone breakwater marking the harbour entrance and the river's exit.

Both routines gave him access to the sea, the surf, stretching out to the horizon, and the birds circling and plummeting into it, the porpoises catching waves, and other birds and fish and dogs and humankind variously disporting themselves. Once in a while he saw a wallaby splashing around at the water's edge.

In deference to Fullalove's arrival he bought a newspaper for shared consumption. But when he got back to the house it was to find Fullalove immersed online in *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* and refusing all distractions. It was the first time Fullalove had actually accessed the site, despite the invitation to contribute. Like many a writer and journalist, he was not terribly interested in the rest of the material in any publication he contributed to. Indeed, he hadn't actually contributed to it at all, yet. He had felt no great impetus to look at it. But finally his speculations about Osbourne's dodginess invited some investigation. Before he submitted anything it might be a good idea to check it out. If only to confirm his suspicions. Maybe he'd end up not writing for it at all. Laziness, and a sense that it might be best not to know, both useful in their way, had delayed any investigation so far. But now, with nothing much else to do in the gentle, relaxed tedium of rural life, he made the effort to focus his attention.

'You could make me a cup of tea,' he suggested. But beyond that he was silent, gaze fixed on Plant's computer screen. He deflected all attempts to engage him in conversation. Plant sat out on the deck and tried to find something of interest in the newspaper.

Fullalove emerged into the sunlight, his analysis completed. Or at least the first analysis. Nothing was ever complete. There were always further depths to explore in any of Fullalove's explorations, level beneath level beneath level. But his first survey of *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* had been done.

'Predictable agenda,' he announced. 'Safe old establishment liberal, far from unique. A bit of soft satire and insider gossip. For feminism, diversity, woke, electric cars, asylum seekers, free movement of labour. Against racism, slavery, homophobia, misogyny, fossil fuel.'

'So a clean bill of health,' Plant said.

'Certainly mad and bad enough, but hardly dangerous.'

'So what does it really mean?'

'What it means is what's left out. Same as the daily papers. Same as all the establishment media. Nothing about economic justice, public ownership of the means of production, welfare state, free education, all the old socialist objectives. So whose values are they promoting?' Fullalove asked.

'You tell me.'

'The dominant ideas of the age are the ideas of the ruling class.'

'Go on.'

'So all this stuff they go on about, it's pitched as radical, progressive, oppositional.'

'And?'

'And it isn't, is it? These are the values of the ruling class. Nothing about economic justice, nothing about economic exploitation. This is all about be nice to immigrants because business needs them for cheap labour. Free movement of labour – so you can ship in people with no

union traditions, bring them in from different ethnic and religious groups who won't combine on a class basis. The old divide and rule agenda of the British Raj. Which keeps wages down. While the old values of religion and family that unified a culture are wiped out by market forces, twenty-four hours a day trading seven days a week, forget a day of rest, forget the Sabbath.'

'So you've rediscovered religion. You miss the Sabbath,'

'What I miss is that time when the shops were all closed on Saturday afternoon and all day Sunday.'

'You're getting religion.'

'Depends what you mean by religion. What I miss is that day and a half every week not devoted to buying and selling, that day and a half in which the possibility of some other purpose to life than making money might exist.'

'But having shops open at the weekend is convenient.'

'For some people,' Fullalove agreed. 'Like slavery. Good for business.'

'So now you're defending all those religious and family values we couldn't wait to escape from.'

'I'm not defending anything,' Fullalove said, 'not right now. You don't have to be religious or family oriented. But you can just look and see why those values have been systematically discredited and destroyed. In order to allow market values only. And market values mean no job security. You're left vulnerable to market manipulations. How many people have to run two jobs now because there's not enough work or income with just one? How many people in a job are underemployed, underpaid? But that doesn't register in the unemployment figures. Who has a job for life any more?

'I'm pointing out the implications of this so-called progressive agenda. Put all this alongside the exclusions, the stuff *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* never mentions. You swamp your paper with all the squeaky clean, so-called progressive causes, and make sure the socialist, old left, and radical economic ideas are totally excluded. Not a mention of any of

those issues. They get no voice. They just get forgotten.'

'Do they?'

'Well, that's obviously the idea, the intention.'

'Could be,' Plant agreed. 'Assuming it's all as planned as all that.'

'Of course it is. Distraction politics. Keeps out the real issues, blocks them out with all this feel-good stuff. Why else would they pump it out all the time?'

'Maybe Osbourne believes it.'

'Maybe he does. It's a different ruling class, now,' Fullalove said. 'No longer just inherited wealth from old feudal landowners and industrialists, not for years. Now it's speculators and hustlers and market forces and internet racketeers. They don't respect the old values, they're trying to eliminate them. They're anti-conservative. But that doesn't make them radicals. There's nothing left-wing about them. They're as greedy and as contemptuous of the poor and the workers as the old ruling class. But they have these ideas they present as progressive, leftist. Which they're not. It's all a veneer. They're creating a culture-free, history-free, free movement of non-unionized labour, cut price immigrant work force, free of family values, free of religious values. What they mean by free is the free market. Just money, money, money now. Everything that once defined us is now destroyed. And these are the people running the show. The conservatives are as out of fashion as old lefties like you. They've lost their voice, like the left has lost its voice. No one to speak out against the dominant values any more.'

'So,' Plant said, 'why's Osbourne running this line?'

Fullalove shrugged. 'It's the current line.'

'What's behind it?' Plant asked again.

Fullalove shrugged some more. 'Ruling class values, what else?'

'So just like the rest of the media.'

'What else would you expect?'

Plant shook his head sadly. Why would you expect anything else?

'And you know what else gets forgotten?' Fullalove asked.

'No.'

'Amidst all their progressive, individual liberties and diversity causes.'

'No, what?'

'Dope.'

'Dope?'

'What the literary theorists used to call a significant absence. There's nothing about dope. Not in any of the numbers I've looked through. Which coming up here in the Valley of the Weed is a bit weird, wouldn't you think? Nothing about legalization. Nothing about medical marijuana. Not a mention of anything, weed, coke, acid, ice, any of it. Nothing about body searches. Nothing about drug-testing at festivals. All these hot topics that stir folks up, totally ignored. And we're in Weedopolis. What does that tell you?'

'I don't know. What does it tell me? Or you? That they're not into drugs, I guess.'

'That there's something dodgy going on.'

'Ah,' Plant said, 'why didn't I think of that?'

Fullalove gave him a filthy look.

'But what sort of dodginess?' Plant asked.

'That's what we have to find out.'

'We? Have to?'

'Sure.'

Fullalove took another swig of Mount Warning mineral water, a bite of a Byron Bay brownie, and began to roll a joint.

'Hey ho, hey ho,' Plant sang. 'Off to work we go.'

Fullalove did a Grumpy imitation. There was a Grumpy, wasn't there? Anyway, a grumpy expression. But another toke on the joint and another bite of chocolate brownie forced the mouth and lips to move and disperse it.

Out in the bush a couple of whipbirds did their whipbird call.

'Time to get moving,' Fullalove said, stretching out arms and legs and then reclining back in his chair.

'Conceptually,' Plant, who had not long got back in, agreed.

The whipbirds gave another crack of the whip.

Fullalove returned to the computer.

'You can use my computer if you need,' Plant said.

'I already did,' Fullalove said, 'talk to you later,' dispensing with any thanks or acknowledgement.

'Yeah, I noticed.'

But Fullalove was back on the trail and immersed in the pursuit. 'Fee, fi, fo, fum,' he sang, 'I smell the blood of a government man.'

Later in the day he came out to the deck again and continued his report.

'It's an interesting operation. Hard to get a clear hold on what exactly they're up to.'

'Maybe they're not up to anything,' Plant said, roused from the mild torpor he had sunk into as the afternoon wore on.

'Oh they are, don't be fooled.'

'Why, and how, would I be fooled?'

'By the blandly innocuous.'

'And that's what it is?'

'Far from it. But it can look that way.'

'And why isn't it that?'

'Because there's an underlying consistent pattern.'

'Of what?'

'Exclusions and recurrence.'

'Any chance of something specific in all this?'

'Sure,' Fullalove said. His invitation. He took a swig of Mount Warning mineral water, gritted his teeth, mouth open.

'Namely,' he began.

'Yes?'

'He's definitely dodgy.'

'He's not unique in that,' Plant said.

'No.'

'But it worries you.'

'Not especially.'

'What's the problem, then?'

'He just doesn't add up. The paper's got to be unviable. No way he covers his costs.'

'Advertising.'

'Not enough.'

'So?'

'So, who knows?'

'But you suspect.'

'Natch.'

'Maybe you should take the job and apply your investigative skills to discovering where his funds come from.'

'Might be best not to know.'

'Like that, is it?'

'Best not to say, anyway.'

'You've got your suspicions.'

'You bet I have.'

'The usual ones. But they are inexpressible. As per usual.'

'Too fucking right, they are.'

'So no point in asking.'

'Absolutely not.'

'Best not to know.'

'For a long and happy life, yes.'

'I'll be advised by you,' Plant said.

'Wise move.' Fullalove agreed.

'So it's the CIA again. That old story, Cultural Freedom subsidies.'

'Could be, though not necessarily,' Fullalove said. 'That's the story everyone knows. But they weren't the only ones up to it. The Brits were in it up to their ears too: Forum World Features, Current Affairs Research Services Centre. They were funnelling funds to complicit publishers.'

'What about Australia?'

'You're the research specialist. Start digging in the archives.'

'And stir up a hornet's nest.'

'You've got to do it discreetly,' Fullalove said.

'You've got to be joking. Assuming they haven't shredded all the documents, anything surviving would be flagged. Make any move to access it and they'd know immediately.'

'I guess so,' Fullalove agreed. 'Wired for sound. Pity though. Anyway just assume everyone's involved in it. Which they probably are. CIA, ASIO, MI6, Mossad. Doesn't much matter what acronym's behind it. Could even be one you've never heard of. But the same old agenda. Support the liberal left. Stamp out socialists and communists.'

'Is that it?'

'Pretty much.'

Fullalove focused on rolling up another smoke and said nothing further.

'Steadying your nerves?' Plant asked.

Fullalove drew deeply on the joint and said no more.

'So what have you decided?' Plant asked. 'Are you going to write for it?'

'Sure.'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

'Despite your suspicions.'

'I'm interested in it.'

'Interested in it? Why?'

'Something about it.'

'Like what?'

'Inauthenticity,' Fullalove said.

'And you can't resist getting back into print.'

'Can't resist getting paid again, either,' Fullalove said. 'The economic base. Remember?'

Chapter Thirteen

Plant had waited for a phone call or a text or an email from Lucy, but nothing had come. Decorum, maybe. Or lack of interest. He gave it a few days, and a few days more, observing the decorum, if it was decorum. Finally he phoned her at the shop.

'Plant!' she said. 'How lovely to hear from you.'

She did it well.

'How about dinner?' he asked. 'Sometime,' he added, so it didn't seem too peremptory, too demanding.

'You cooking?' she said.

'There's a Greek restaurant at Coolangatta,' he began.

'Lovely,' she said. 'What time?'

'Whenever,' he said.

'Why don't you come by and pick me up after work?'

She gave him the address. He wondered whether picking her up first meant that she would or wouldn't be inviting him back in afterwards. And whether that was something he was really concerned about. And what he was up to anyway? Just catching up with an old friend. Acquaintance. Former client's wife. Widow. He wondered if he spent too much time wondering about things. The answer was probably yes. Maybe he was under-occupied, needed employment, needed a case. Needed something.

'So this is Point Danger,' Plant said as Lucy answered the door to her apartment.

'Don't you love it?'

'Great spot.'

'No, the name.'

'Oh, the name. No, not especially.'

'Captain Cook named it. At least, he named somewhere Point Danger. But it might have been Fingal Head he meant. Anyway, it adds a

spice of ambguity. Never quite sure where the danger really is.'

'Sounds dangerous enough to me.'

'Oh Plant, I didn't know you were so fearful.'

'Careful, maybe,' he said. 'I just left Fullalove sitting drinking bottles of Mount Warning mineral water. He's just discovered it and vows never to drink any other. When you've got warnings like that on your kitchen table every day, coming to a place called Point Danger can make you just a little bit anxious.'

'Paranoid,' she said.

'Just "Be Prepared", maybe.'

'Paranoid,' she said.

'No, he loves it, it sums up his whole world view.'

'But it freaks you out. Makes you anxious.'

'Doesn't exactly calm one down,' he conceded.

It was a modern apartment, clean, bright and the rest of it. But what Plant noted more than the decor or the view or the furnishings and the cushions or any of those things, which he never noticed that much anyway, were the books. And the books dominated. They were everywhere. New books. Hardbacks in dust jackets. Hardbacks without dust jackets. Dust jackets without hardbacks. Shiny new paperbacks. All scattered around the floor, beside the couch, on the cushions, stacked on the table. There were bookcases against the wall that were full of books, neat, undisturbed. But over the floor and the chairs and table they spread everywhere. It was like an upmarket version of Fullalove's hovel. But clean. Very upmarket. These were new books scattered around, unlike Fullalove's ancient treasures and disinterred rarities. And not just books, magazines too: *Vogue*, *Harper's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *New Yorker*.

'Books,' Plant said. Rather obviously. Rather superfluously.

'Oh, them,' Lucy said, looking round and smiling. 'Osbourne gives them to me.'

'That's very generous of him,' Plant said, looking at them spreading everywhere.

'Oh, well, when I say gives them to me, I mean he just sort of passes them across for me to have a look at and have a read of if they're any good, and then they go into the shop.'

'Still very generous of him.'

'They don't cost him anything,' she said. 'They're review copies for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'You never told me he owned a magazine.'

'Didn't I?

'No.'

'You sound put out. Should I have?'

'You just said the bookshop.'

'How remiss of me. What's the problem? Have you got internet aspirations? You want to write for him?'

Plant smiled and shook his head. Time to cool it, he told himself.

'No, it was just a surprise when I heard.'

'And it wouldn't have been a surprise if I'd told you.'

'Well, maybe ...'

'Well, maybe what?'

'It would've been a surprise whoever told me. As indeed it was. When I was told.'

'Fine, fine, cool it Plant. It's just that you made it sound like I was withholding evidence or something.'

'And were you?'

'That's what I mean,' she said.

'What is?'

'The feeling of being grilled. Alive. On the old Aussie back yard barbecue.'

It was time to forgo words and to nod. He nodded.

But there were still things to ask.

'So he gets all these books as review copies? All these?'

'Great, isn't it? He had this brilliant idea. He's good on ideas. You know how æons ago the book review pages in magazines used to have

a 'Books Received' column? Listing the books that had been sent in but didn't get reviewed. It let people know that they were out there, published, gave them a mention. Well, Osbourne figured if he ran a list like that again every issue, and he also did a lot of short notices, you know, just brief reviews, but a lot of them, then publishers would start sending lots of stuff. They'd know they'd at least get some sort of mention. And it's hard to get any sort of mention these days. And that way we'd get lots of new stock for the shop. New books. Discount prices.'

'And you get to read them first.'

'Some of them, anyway. The ones worth reading. Then I sort them out into categories and take them down to the shop.'

'And sell them.'

'Well, the ones people want. There's an awful lot of rubbish being pumped out.'

'And what happens to that?'

'It sells too. Eventually. Amazing what sells.'

'And the magazines?' he asked.

'Oh, them. No, that's just my little addiction. Well, one of them. And not so little. I have to pay for them. Alas.'

'What about the second-hand books?'

'What about them?'

'Well, it's not only publishers' review copies that you sell.'

'Of course not.'

'So what, people come in with them and you decide if they're worth buying?'

'Oh, no. That would be a nightmare, having people coming in with rubbish they're wanting to get rid of. It'd be like a charity shop. You've seen the way all the charity shops have to put up notices on their doors saying don't dump stuff overnight. Or ever.'

'So you don't buy them.'

'Me? No, Osbourne does that.'

'He comes in?'

'No. No, we just say we don't buy books over the counter. If they've got a big collection, you know, some old academic's library or some dead writer's remains, Osbourne goes and checks them out. But we don't buy individual volumes.'

'Why not?'

'Too much trouble. Too time consuming, working out a valuation, looking up sale prices, I mean the hassle to do it properly. Anyway, no, Osbourne decided and I agree with him. He just focuses on big collections and gives a lump sum price, never that much, people are desperate to get rid of them. It's a buyer's market.'

'For you. What about the shop?'

'Well, that's a buyer's market for people looking for a book. We don't overcharge. We like to keep the stock moving. No point in having it all overpriced and sitting there for ever.'

'Makes sense.'

'Anything you fancy?' she asked. 'Just help yourself.'

The books, she meant.

But what I really fancy is Lucy, Plant reflected. And was that acceptable? Or these days did it mean he had the soul of a predator? And consequently was inexpressible. In polite company. Yet wasn't it just a grateful response to the beauties of the natural world? Almost religious in its appreciation of the creation. Almost. It seemed religious enough when he thought about it. Like appreciating the plumage of parrots, the way the King and Queen Parrots matched each other, one red-headed, one green, one green-breasted, one red. Looked like intelligent design to Plant's eyes. The parrots. Which was the sort of thing he appreciated in Lucy's elegance. Intelligent appreciation, is that what he was up to?

He leafed through some of the scattered volumes while she went off to do whatever she had to do before announcing that she was ready to go. He took a last look at them. The books. Amazing.

Lucy emerged with a ready-rolled joint in her hand, already lit. She

took another drag on it, passed it across to Plant, and shut the bedroom door.

Some people produced their stash of dope and rolled it in front of you. That way you got to see how much they were holding, what it was held in, elegant little boxes or supermarket plastic sandwich bags. Not Lucy. Maybe she was paranoid that displaying it might get it stolen. Never put temptation in a dope smoker's way.

'Still smoking,' Plant said. Rather obviously and superfluously, he realized, even as he said it. He took the joint and sucked on it and held his breath, rather than trying to extricate himself from his conversation-stopping ineptness with more words.

She answered anyway.

'Why else would one live in Weed Shire? Don't you think?'

He took a second drag and passed the joint back to her.

'Is that the only reason?'

'Give me two more, then.'

'Well ...'

She blew a smoke ring at him. Rather wastefully, he thought. He would have held it in.

'The beaches. The weather. The organic vegetables,' she said, investing them with just that note of insincerity, subterfuge, dissimulation, taking the words out of his mouth before he could even think to come up with them.

'Well,' he tried again.

She laughed. Quite enchantingly. She was good at it.

Plant was enchanted. He surrendered.

'I guess so,' he said.

'Of course.'

'Seems like a good life,' Plant observed, 'sitting around getting stoned and reading books all day.'

'Not all day,' she said.

'What, not with all those books in the shop?'

'In the shop! No, absolutely not,' she said. 'Osbourne would have a fit. Another one. I was having a smoke one time, when I was first there, and Osbourne came by and went off his head at me. Well, as much as he goes off his head. All very controlled and polite, you know.'

'I don't know him,' Plant said.

'Ah well, all very civilized. Asked me for one good reason why he shouldn't fire me.

'"Because you fancy me," I said. So I kept my job. But absolutely no smoking. Nor at the magazine office. Absolutely insane. I really don't understand people. Men. They're all still so freaked out about dope even in this day and age. They need to be force fed THC to calm them down and get them sane. You'd better warn your little furry friend, too, what's his name, Fulloffun, Furrylove?'

'Something like that,' Plant agreed.

'Well you'd better warn him not to smoke in front of the headmaster, right?'

'Otherwise he'll get a caning?'

She looked at him quizzically, shook her head.

'Men,' she said.

'Why's he so worried about it?'

'Bad for business, I suppose,' Lucy said. 'Doesn't want the shop to get shut down.'

'Is that likely?'

She laughed.

'Who knows? The cops can be pretty rabid up here. They prowl around the streets with their sniffer dogs, so you don't want to be carrying a bag of heads around with you.'

'Would they come into a bookshop?'

'If they wanted to buy a book, maybe.'

'With their dogs?'

'Maybe if they were looking for *The Hound of the Baskervilles*,' she suggested.

'Seems unlikely.'

She laughed. 'Maybe a little wisp of smoke might have sidled out through the open window. Or beneath the door.'

'I doubt it.'

'So do I, to be honest. Which I do try to be. But that's what the boss ordered. So, a smoke-free zone.'

'Pity,' Plant said. 'After all, a decent bookshop is just the right sort of ambience for a quiet smoke, I would've thought.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I imagine you would've.'

'You know, set up with hookahs and narghiles and ashtrays. Instead of that bad coffee that the trendy places try to lure you in with. And you could have a whole range of classic dope books. They'd sell.'

'Maybe,' she said, 'Maybe not. You're in Weed Shire, why would you want to bother to read a dope book, when you can get the real thing up here?'

'So is this a long term career job, running the shop and not smoking?'

'No need to be contemptuous,' she said.

Plant apologized. 'Just curious,' he said, which he was.

'But I can see what you mean. Seemed like a nice place to chill out in and a nice enough job to pass the time.'

'Till something else turns up.'

'Could be,' she agreed.

The Greek restaurant looked across the road and across a car park to the sea. Plant sat with his back to it so that Lucy could face it. Somehow Lucy inspired these sorts of courtesy, while at the same time rather mocking them.

'Turning your back on the ocean, hey, Plant? Had enough of it?'

'I can hear it.'

'Really? Above the traffic noise and the hubbub of human conversation?'

'Sense it, anyway.'

'You're a lucky man.'

He looked her in the eye.

'Yes,' he said.

She laughed.

They ordered wine. House white.

'When you're happily stoned you don't need to comb through the wine list. You don't need to know all that carry on about varieties and vintages and regions and chateaux and stuff,' she said.

'I guess not.'

'I mean, you don't, clearly, do you? I used to try so hard to know it all.'

Was this in response to his suggesting the house white? Probably. But it wasn't necessarily sub-textually critical. Could have been in positive agreement. The easiest thing was just to nod. He nodded. She smiled at him, enchantingly.

The restaurant didn't have vegetarian moussaka, but it did have vegetarian lasagna. Plant ordered it.

'Isn't that Italian?' Lucy asked.

But it was vegetarian, and good, which was what mattered. As with the wine, provenance was not an issue for Plant. Lucy ordered grilled fish. Some poor dead, slaughtered barramundi or snapper or whiting.

'Well, isn't this nice.'

'Yes,' Plant agreed. A new positive note. He heard it, recognized it, stuck with it. 'Yes, indeed,' he added. Not quite Molly Bloom. He thought *Ulysses* overrated, anyway.

'So how did you get to know Osbourne?' he asked.

'Oh, he was an old friend of Archer's.'

The dead husband.

'What, his publisher? Agent?'

'Yes, something like that, probably.'

'Is that all?'

'What else?'

'His secret life?'

'What, spooks and stuff? I wouldn't know anything about that.'

'Wouldn't, or wouldn't want to?'

'Yes.'

'Yes?'

'Both.'

'And your husband's contacts ...?'

'He kept all of that strictly to himself.'

'Is that so?'

'I had no idea about it. I told you that at the time.'

'I thought you once told me that he gave you a number to call in case anything happened to him.'

'Did I?'

'So you had some idea about it.'

'All he gave me was a number. Said he'd been doing some confidential stuff for the government.'

'Did he say what?'

'No. Of course not.'

'Didn't you ask?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Why would I? He said it was confidential.'

'Why wouldn't you?'

'Why would I have believed him if he'd told me?'

'So you didn't wonder what he'd been up to?'

'Probably dobbing in his colleagues or his students for unacceptable thoughts.'

'What sort of unacceptable?'

'How should I know? Whatever's the flavour of the month.'

'But you did call that number when he died.'

She nodded. Of course.

'And?'

'And nothing. You think they gave me a leather-bound résumé of his secret life?'

'But you knew he had had a secret life.'

'I knew he said he had.'

'And?'

'And I wasn't especially interested. It just sounded like a pathetic lie to cover his fucking philandering so, no, I didn't ask any further.'

'Not even when you phoned them?'

'Of course not. I was in a state of shock. I'd just found my husband dead. You think I felt like having a chat about his secret life?'

'And you never asked afterwards?'

'Who would I ask?'

He wasn't convinced. There was no reason not to believe her. But it wasn't a matter of reason. He didn't think she would have left it all unexamined like that. He wouldn't have. And she wasn't someone devoid of curiosity. Or intelligence. Or a lot of other things if it came to that, suspicion, low cunning, dissimulation, the whole gamut of it. And so charming with it. Altogether too appealing.

'So how does Osbourne fit in? You got back in touch with him? He gave you a call? You bumped into him in the bottle shop?'

'Yes, that sort of thing,' she said. 'He said, "You need a job. Keep you honest. I've got the perfect job for you, why don't you run this bookshop for me?"

'"What sort of bookshop?" I asked.

'"Oh, just second-hand."

'"Busy?"

'"Up to you."

'"What, you want me to drum up business?" I asked.

'"Well, why not?" he said.

'So that was it. A job offer. I took it. Not frantically busy. Ticks along.

I had nothing else lined up. Nothing else to do. So I took it. Why not?'

She took a sip of wine.

'Do you ever think of all the people you ever had sex with who are dead now?' she asked.

'I hadn't thought of it,' Plant said. But without a doubt it would be hard not to be thinking of it in the future, and probably more and more often, now that she'd raised the topic.

'You should.'

'Why's that?'

'Oh, I don't know, it's just that I sometimes do.'

Plant nodded.

'You want to ask, were there lots? But you feel inhibited.'

Plant did the demurring number.

'You want to find out if I've been a loose woman. Isn't that the sort of language private eyes use?'

'Probably not these days.'

'So what would they say?'

Plant was nonplussed. Not an expression he'd ever used very much, if at all. But it seemed appropriate. Nonplussed. It was how he felt. He neither wanted to enunciate the no doubt degrading, misogynistic terms American private eyes might have used, back whenever, but nor did he want to seem to be collecting details of her sex life. Interesting as it probably might be. The odds were that she would presumably tell him anyway, without any research or investigation on his part.

'I think I'm going to have to order baklava,' Plant decided.

Lucy smiled and nodded agreement.

'So you keep the till and do the books,' Plant said, getting the conversation back to the bookshop, away from the bedroom and dead sexual partners.

'No, Osbourne does the books.'

'As in the accounts, you mean. He comes and checks the till?'

'Yes, he takes the takings to the bank and all that. Says it's too risky

for me to be carrying cash around on the pavements of the Gold Coast. Even though you might think that somewhere called the Gold Coast sounds like the appropriate sort of place for people to lug precious metals around in.'

'So what does he do? Have an armoured delivery truck?'

She laughed.

'Maybe his four wheel drive is armoured. I never thought of that. I'll give it a bang on the door panels next time he comes round.'

'Perhaps not.'

'Why not?'

'You wouldn't want him to think you were checking him out.'

'Why not?'

'Might look like you were thinking about an ambush and a hold up. Checking how tough the panels were. See if you could just slam into them.'

'And steal the takings.'

'Why not?'

'They're not that splendid.'

'Really?'

'Well, it's hardly big business, is it? You've seen the place.'

'I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it, to be honest,' he said, being dishonest. 'So he's hands on?'

Lucy looked at him quizzically.

'You're trying to make out he's a groper?'

'Not at all.'

'Crimes against women,' she laughed. 'What's more hands on than that?'

'Is he, incidentally?'

'Aren't all men?' she asked. 'And not just incidentally.'

Plant said nothing. It seemed the best option.

'No, not really,' she said. 'Osbourne's all right.'

'"A bit of all right" is the usual expression, I think,' Plant said.

She shook her head at him, sadly.
'Men,' she said.

Chapter Fourteen

'Drop by the office some time and have a chat,' Osbourne had said to Fullalove, steering him to the bookshop door.

'What, here?' Fullalove had asked, no signs of any office paraphernalia beyond the cash register.

'No, not here.'

Osbourne had taken a business card out of his wallet and passed it across.

'Here,' he had said, pointing to the address on it.

'Why would he want another office?' Fullalove pondered, half to Plant, half to himself. 'He's got the bookshop set up, why not run it from there?'

'Maybe not enough space,' Plant suggested.

'Maybe, maybe not. He could just've rented a unit next door.'

'If there was one available.'

'There'd've been one available.'

'Maybe he likes to keep his different businesses separate.'

'Makes you wonder why,' Fullalove said.

It hadn't made Plant wonder why, but it gave Fullalove something to speculate about, until he got round to calling in on the office. And afterwards, too.

The office was situated in another light industrial estate on the road into Byron Bay. Some way from the centre of town. Garden supplies, mattresses, fresh bread, car repairs and more, much more indeed, and amongst it all *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Not that its name was blazoned across the frontage. There was no sign, just a number beside the door. Like the big media companies, it did not encourage visitors.

Fullalove had expected a high-tech metallic minimalism. But inside it was like an auxiliary extension of the bookshop, the walls lined to the ceiling with wooden bookshelves, and filled with books. The office

occupied the front part of the substantial unit and through an open door at the back Fullalove could see a further wall of books. They seemed to be arranged in blocks according to their appearance and colour and bindings, old, ancient, modern, rather than alphabetically by author. More decorative than functional. No doubt *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* accessed all the information it needed from the internet rather than from books. Books were something to sell rather than consult or read. Osbourne had been a publisher and now he was an editor, Fullalove reminded himself.

'Great library,' he said nonetheless.

'Gives the place a bit of class, don't you think?' Osbourne said. 'Otherwise it's like living in a sardine tin in these places.'

Osbourne was like one of those smooth, charming, superior, well-spoken English actors of the old school. A regal smile, not of disdain, more of weary toleration, but clearly emanating authority. So clean-cut as to have to imply something dodgy. At least to the jaundiced eye of Fullalove. But Fullalove could live with that. He was not repulsed. The dodgy was always of interest to Fullalove. And Osbourne seemingly took to Fullalove, which not everyone did, but was not necessarily surprising since Osbourne was genial to everyone.

'I realized there were all these people who had moved up here, old media people, television presenters, foreign correspondents, movie critics, literary editors, novelists, early-retired academics, all these old hacks. Once they'd all been household names. Big shots. And now they'd come and retired up here, and they all had nothing to do, sitting around bored out of their skulls. Some had still kept a place in Sydney or Melbourne, but half the time they were up here, wandering around like lost souls.

'And they were all desperately missing what they used to do, which was to hold forth, basically, you know, to give their take on the news, pontificate, reminisce, whatever, there they all were waiting to bang on

at the drop of a hat, waiting for someone to give them something to occupy themselves with, satisfy their egos, insofar as their egos could ever be satisfied, but that's a different issue.

'Anyway, here they all were, and I knew a fair few of them, from when I was in publishing and when I had the agency. And from their phoning up the shop to beg me to buy their libraries now they'd moved up here and downsized and all that and had decided to get rid of their books instead of keeping them in a self-storage unit, which apart from being inconvenient and not very practical, is not cheap. So there they were. I knew their interests, what they knew about, what they could write on.

'And they were desperate for it, you could tell that when you met them. Itching to do something. So I figured, bundle them together and get them banging on again in print.'

'So this is like a senior citizens' last chance.'

'Heavens, no.'

'But aren't they all a bit long in the tooth? Getting past it?'

'Not at all. These are professionals. They'll just carry on till they drop. Can't help themselves.'

'But all a bit retro? A bit passé?'

'Well, in the sense that they know what they're writing about, the answer is probably yes. Not like all those media studies interns swamping the press and television now. What's left of it. Up on a sexual harassment charge as soon as look at them. No wonder nobody reads the papers or watches television any more. These young graduates, they don't know anything, you've got to teach them everything from scratch. I'm too old for that. I want to hire people who can just go out or sit down and get it done. I don't care how. I don't want to know how. I just want copy ready to go. And spelled correctly too, thank you.'

'And these old codgers can provide that?'

'They certainly can. And do.'

'So this isn't just community therapy for retirees,' Fullalove clarified with his usual charm.

Osbourne was unrattled, unfazed.

'Not at all. This was an opportunity. I figured, here's all this talent and expertise, why not use it? They're all household names, they're all still remembered, they've all got credibility. What this country hasn't had for too long is any significant, intelligent, informed, oppositional press. And if you do it online you don't have all that expense and labour of print and paper and distribution and delivery that setting up a paper used to involve. So ...'

'Oppositional,' Fullalove said.

'Nothing extreme. Just good, honest, progressive, liberal commentary.'

'Honest,' Fullalove said.

Osbourne smiled approvingly.

'A healthy society needs balance. Alternative views. Without that it stagnates. And there's a demand for it. And where there's a demand, there's a market.'

'So you're in business.'

'I certainly am,' Osbourne said, with undisguised self-satisfaction.

'So how did you start? Go round knocking on doors asking them to write for you. Set up an old folks' lunch?'

'No, no, they'd already done that, half a dozen or so of them used to meet in a pub every week or so. I just tagged along for a while till I got a sense of it.'

'Of what?'

'Of where they were at. What they could come up with.'

'Progressive but polite,' Fullalove suggested.

'Absolutely,' Osbourne agreed, unprovoked by Fullalove's jibes, if they were jibes.

'That's where you come in.'

'Me?'

'Yes. Right on cue. You used to write those weird pieces.'

'Till I got sacked,' Fullalove said, the indignity and injustice of it still

apparently rankling.

'They were great fun. You ever feel like turning out a few more, I'd like to have a look at them.'

'With a view to what?' Fullalove asked, not without suspicion. 'Running them in the paper?'

'What else?' Osbourne said. 'Well, forget paper, fair enough, we've dispensed with paper, it's all online now. Liven things up with a bit of lunacy. Don't want to get too staid and predictable and boring. We need a bit more of the mad in *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Without being distasteful.'

'You don't want distasteful?' Fullalove asked.

'I think you'd be about as distasteful as we'd want,' Osbourne said, clapping him on the shoulder and steering him out towards the door.

'What about dangerous?'

'Oh, we can be dangerous enough. Shameless Seamus and Ghostly Sperrit dig out the occasional scandalous snippet. They like a bit of sensation and attention. And the women are splendid. They can get really savage. Got some useful talent there. We just need a bit more of the mad.'

'Sure,' Fullalove said. What else was there to say?

Chapter Fifteen

Plant took his usual morning walk, a five or ten minute drive to the coast and then a half hour's brisk stroll along the beach. Briskish. But not too brisk. Clearing his head in the salt air, watching the terns dive, and looking out for whales spurting on the horizon. The roar of the surf breaking on the beach a steady accompaniment. When he got back Fullalove was sitting smoking a joint and watching television. A repeat of Nigella dishing up some sugar-laden chocolate confection.

'You planning on writing a cooking column?' Plant asked.

Fullalove nodded, eyes fixed on the screen.

'Could be an idea, why not? Roast Lady Lamb, Lady Lamb Shanks, Lady Lamb Chops.'

'Looks more like you're looking for menus for the munchies.'

'Background research,' Fullalove explained. Or claimed. 'U.K. media family. Her father edited *The Spectator*, her brother edited *The Daily Telegraph*.'

'And that's why you claim you're watching her?

'Never hurts to know the background. You need to know the idiom. The way they think.'

'The way who think?'

'Establishment media.'

He passed the joint across.

'And this is you preparing to plunge back into writing for the press? Or just idle curiosity? Or you've got some deeper project involved, like checking out some of the recipes?'

'Fuzzbuzz,' Fullalove said.

'Who's Fuzzbuzz?'

'Fuzzbuzz, you know, I told you. You suffering short-term memory loss? Maybe you shouldn't be smoking so much. Give us that joint back before you bliss out altogether.'

'I'm fine,' Plant said, holding on to it. 'Who's Fuzzbuzz? You tell me

so many things I can't remember them all.'

'Probably for the best.'

'So who is he? Or she? Or it, not to be too gender specific. They, maybe.'

'He.'

'And?'

'The Fuzzbuzz who's offering me work.'

'Oh, that Fuzzbuzz.'

'Yeah, that Fuzzbuzz, what other Fuzzbuzz would it be?'

'So why're you watching Nigella? You're saying he's related to her?'

'No, why would I say that?'

'You were banging on about media families.'

'Oh, yeah, right. No, not related. Not as far as I know. But he was part of that media scene for a while.'

'What, cooking shows?'

'No, don't be ridiculous. But he was working over there in the U.K. in publishing for a while. Then as an agent.'

'As in secret agent?'

'Probably. Literary agent, he claims.'

'Another media family.'

'I don't know if he's got any family at all. But he worked in media in the U.K.'

'And now he's back here again.'

'Yeah.'

'Some sort of remittance man? Watched too much Nigella, smoked too much dope and got himself deported?'

'Be nice to think so.'

'And this is your background research.'

'Like you always say, first thing you need to check out is your employer.'

'Did I say that?'

'Often.'

'Don't tell anyone.'

'It's good advice.'

'Sure. Just don't say that I said so.'

'Why would I?'

'Good. Bad for business.'

'Sure. No point in giving credit where credit's due if it's not welcome.'

'Put it under your own by-line.'

'Of course.'

'Standard practice.'

'Of course.'

'I was forgetting.'

'Like I said,' Fullalove said, 'you're doing too much dope.'

Plant looked across at Fullalove sitting there, eyes still on the screen, undistracted, entranced even. Had Fullalove really said that? He would have replied but words failed him. Not for the first time. Maybe Fullalove was right. Maybe he had been doing too much dope. But it was Fullalove of all people who was telling him. He shook himself. Like a bird coming out of a bird bath. Or a dog after rolling in the dirt. Maybe a bit less vigorously than them, more conceptually, more metaphorically.

'I can't believe you have the hide to say that,' Plant finally said. 'And I don't believe that's why you're watching Nigella.'

Fullalove grinned. All smoke-yellowed teeth and surrounding ill-shaven bristle.

'Here, roll yourself another one,' he said, passing the bag of dope and the papers across.

Plant rolled himself another one.

On the screen Nigella got up in the middle of the night and raided the refrigerator for something sweet.

Fullalove nodded wisely, as they used to say, registering his overall agreement.

'The only trouble with Fuzzbuzz,' Fullalove began, and then stopped and

corrected himself. How could there be only one trouble? Trouble came in battalions. But, to rephrase it, one of the troubles, a major one for Fullalove, was that *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* only appeared online.

'I said why didn't he do a print edition. "Why would I?" he said, "You're a relic, Fullalove, archaic, forget print, print is dead."'

Which deeply upset Fullalove, not being called archaic which he was happy enough with, given his views on contemporary society, but to say that print was dead was, to Fullalove's ears. deeply disturbing, unacceptable, intellectual treason.

'But true?' Plant asked.

'Not if I have anything to do with it.'

And with a house full of unacceptable etc books, Fullalove had a lot of commitment to perpetuating print. Nevertheless, until he could get the business of selling them properly functioning, he could do with some income.

'Beggars can't be choosers,' he said, 'to quote one of those old saws and sayings that print has preserved.'

'Probably from a pre-print culture,' Plant said.

'Even more reason for print. Save the idioms of the past before we lose them.'

'Should make a nice provocative piece for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove agreed.

Fullalove's horror at the abandonment of print was almost palpable. 'Ink in my veins,' he said. 'Fed as a child from the tip of a swan's quill.' The abandonment of print was plunging him into ultra-retro pastiche.

But Fullalove was not one to languish in despair. He lay back in one of Plant's deckchairs and surveyed the rich and various view of Plant's rural seat. Trees, trees, and more trees, stretching up the steep slope to the distant boundary, out of sight, never reached, too steep to visit. And then the realization.

'The great thing with online magazines,' he announced, 'is there are

no boundaries. No limits. You don't have all those old pathetic space problems that used to bug everyone writing for the papers. Cut out half a column to fit in a late advertisement. You were always having to trim your copy back to fit into the word count. Or have some sub-editor cut it back for you. The weeklies were the worst, always the same length pieces to fit into one pissy little page, or a page and a half on a big story. Or a half page for a filler. And you're told that in advance. And if you're not you'd be a mug not to expect it. But now that's all changed. Now you can put a piece online and it can be any length. Whatever suits the story. It could be limitless.'

'That might be a problem,' Plant suggested. 'Droning on longer than the *London Review of Books*.'

'No, spare us, I don't mean limitless like that. Like limitless. And it's not any good for lighting fires, either, the paper won't catch alight. No, I mean it like the story takes its natural length. Doesn't have to fit into a module dependent on the limits of page size. It's a liberation. It's great. Sad as the death of print journalism is, or might have been had it been any good which it hasn't been for years, this offers a better medium. At least in this aspect. And that's a start.'

'Sounds like you're beginning to agree with your boss.'

Fullalove grinned.

'I wouldn't want to go that far. Give me some credit. But, you know, things are complex, good comes out of evil as the poet put it.'

'Is that so?'

'You've got to hope so.'

Chapter Sixteen

'Why don't you come along to the lunch club?' Osbourne had said.

'Lunch club?'

'In a purely informal sense. No membership fees. Just a few chaps meet and have a natter once in a while.'

'Why not?' Fullalove agreed.

'You won't be blackballed,' Osbourne assured him.

It hadn't occurred to Fullalove that he might be, till Osbourne raised the topic. It sounded like something from the depths of time, the century before the previous century. But maybe it wasn't. Maybe things like that still went on in Osbourne's world. Blackballing.

'Just an old pub,' Fullalove described it. Or failed to describe it. Never one to specify any location that he might be found in. 'Nothing special. Usual pub food. You could've got a vegetarian lasagna. I had fish and chips. Can't remember what Osbourne ordered, maybe ...'

Plant cut him short on the menu options.

'Who was there?' he asked.

'Who was there? No one you'd want to know. Just a bunch of old media hacks who've lost their soapboxes. Can't even remember most of their names, haven't seen their by-lines or smiling physogs for years. A couple of desperate freelancers like Ghostly Sperrit and Shameless Seamus ...'

'I know Ghostly, but who's Shameless Seamus?'

'Oh, just another old hack who's lost his soapbox. Used to do leaders and op ed pieces, that sort of stuff. Got let go when the newspapers gave up on news and started filling their pages with lifestyle and advertorial and fillers on global warming. They gave him a column for a while to make up for sacking him. But he lost it when they gave the editor the boot and the new editor brought in his own people. They always do, bring in their own cronies. Not that it's quite a matter of chuck out the

old and bring in the new. More just a sort of all change. Never that new.'

'So what does he do now?'

'Oh, like Ghostly, he does a bit of speech-writing for the odd politician. The odder the better. And now he's thinking about turning to crime, he told me.'

'Sounds a bit desperate.'

'Oh, he's desperate enough.'

'But only thinking about it.'

'Yes.'

'Nothing specific.'

'You don't get specific about things like that.'

'Like what?'

'Turning to crime.'

'So what's he have in mind? Blackmail? Burglary? Standing for parliament?'

'He thinks the answer is to turn to writing fiction, would you believe it?'

'Yes, I can believe it. Guessed it would be. Turning to fiction as in novels, presumably, after a career of writing fiction as in journalism.'

'Exac'ly. Crime fiction. That's what he's planning. He's been going round bailing up whoever he bumps into and asking for ideas. You'd be a mine of information for him.'

'No thanks,' Plant said.

'Fair enough.'

'So he's given up on journalism.'

'Oh no, he keeps on freelancing. Whatever he can get. Anywhere. Writes on anything. They can't help themselves, these old hacks, they never give up. The whole pub was full of them. They just keep on churning stuff out and lobbing it in.'

'Lobbing it in where?'

'Wherever they can. Well, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* for a kick off. Osbourne's onto a good thing up here with all of them slavering to get

their stuff published. He can just pick and choose. Perfect. For him.'

'So a bunch of superannuated journos.'

'And a handful of early-retired academics. All pecking away at their phones like starving chooks.'

'What, looking themselves up on social media?'

'No, they're too ancient to do social media, they still believe in actually meeting each other in the flesh. Or what's left of it. More like in the skin and bone. That's why they were there. Rattle their knuckles together. No, they're suffering early onset memory loss most likely, locked onto their internet search engines trying to rediscover the names of the people they're trying to talk about but can't remember the names of, desperately trying to dig out some forgotten fact to prop up some futile argument. Peck, peck, peck, like chooks in a barnyard. Not as painful as the current generation, probably. But pretty gruesome all the same. Reminded me of why I gave it all up. Couldn't stand the company I had to keep. Squeaky clean and painfully progressive and pig ignorant and privileged. The liberal intelligentsia, heaven help us. Not a woman in sight. Probably because the women are all still employed, having kicked out the old men on early retirement packages and taken over their jobs. They don't need to clutch onto the life rafts like these drowning old buggers, they're still on the deck powering on, the women, while the men have been cast adrift, desperately scrambling for some desert island.'

'You should write that up,' Plant suggested, 'it's quite moving in its way. Where was this desert island?'

'Oh, just some bloody old boozer, some benighted place or other out the back of beyond. Ballina, Bangalow, Billinudgel, Brunswick Heads, Byron Bay, one of those, like they got stuck on the second letter of the alphabet and never got past it.'

'Kingscliff, Lismore, Murwillumbah, Nimbin, Ocean Shores, Pottsville,' Plant offered, some spontaneous alphabetizing.

'Yeah, well, somewhere or other best forgotten. A bunch of desperadoes. Half of them had been high-flyers, you know, top presenters,

big names five or ten years ago. Suddenly they've got no audience and nothing to do. Tragic. Lost souls desperately trying to claw their way back over the waters of oblivion. And the other half were all wannabes, journalists who'd wanted to be novelists, academics who'd wanted to be journalists, all desperate to get into print, hanging onto the crumbling toehold they used to have. Yeah, tragic, really.'

'So Osbourne's a sort of lifeline. Propping up old media hacks.'

'They've always been propped up. How do you think they got to be where they were? By merit? Media figures? They're just a bunch of old trusties who've been propped up by the secret state for years, and now they're being propped up in their retirement. Like on life-support mechanisms. Wheeling in an oxygen tank. Or attaching a colostomy bag. Or a stent, you know, drilling into your groin and propping open the arteries to keep the blood flowing.'

'Ugh.'

'What?'

'Ugh. Never been quite sure how to pronounce it. U. G. H. You see it written down in books but they never give the phonetic transcription. Like Pshaw. P. S. H. A. W.'

Fullalove just shook his head.

'And this is what, Osbourne's editorial team?'

'No, no way. Nothing to do with him.'

'He didn't set it up?'

'No, pre-existent, he says. Just a pool he draws on. He's quite keen on keeping a distance from it.'

'Why's that?'

'His quasi-progressive image,' Fullalove explained. 'This lot is too much good old boys stuff for him. Like the lunches Ross Macdonald set up for crime writers in Santa Barbara. Men only. Well, in his lifetime it was. Kept out his crime writing wife. Margaret Millar. All changed now of course, has been for years.'

'What's that got to do with it?

'Well, someone who passes himself off as a progressive feminist like Osbourne doesn't want to get identified with a bunch of old chauvinists. Not his image.'

'How do you know?'

'Well, he said so, didn't he?'

'I don't know. Did he?'

'Well, he did to me, anyway. Called them a bunch of old fogeys. "Wouldn't you think they'd have invited some women along just on principle?" was how he put it.'

'Just on principle.'

'Yeah. He's a principled sort of bloke.'

'Really?'

'So he says.'

'Says?'

'Implies, anyway. Yeah, he got quite carried away with it all. I asked him about *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* and I got the full PR pitch. I asked if there were any women writing for it and he got quite snappy. "Of course there are," he said, "haven't you looked at it?"

'"Sure," I said. "So not just the old cronies?" I asked him. "Heavens no," he said, "I mean yes. There's still some talent there. But you can't run a magazine from one little stagnant pool."

'"Stagnant?" I asked him.

'"A bit strong, maybe," he said. "But they're not very vigorous. Arthritis. Bad backs. Cataracts, can't see you. Deaf as posts, can't hear you. Shortness of breath. Thrombosis. Fair enough. I'm sympathetic. But you can't depend on them. That's why we've got good women writing. And why we need vigorous young chaps like you."'

'Vigorous young chaps like you?' Plant asked.

'Yeah. Like me,' Fullalove said, all smiles.

Plant shook his head slowly from side to side, meditatively. No doubt at all about Osbourne. Definitely dodgy. A man who would say anything.

But who would complain if someone called them young and vigorous? Would Fullalove say politely, 'Well, not that young'? Or 'Not that vigorous', for that matter? Or would he just smile politely, acknowledging the compliment, registering agreement? Complicity. Complicity in dishonesty, basically. Young and vigorous! Could Fullalove be fooled and flattered that easily?

'Have you considered that he's having you on? That he's just hired you to keep an eye on you? Along with the old cronies. The whole lunch is just a listening post. Monitoring the Northern Rivers rat-bags. All the beautiful and privileged. Plus you.'

'It had passed my mind,' Fullalove said.

'So who was there?'

'Oh, like I said, a couple of faded television presenters, a handful of novelists ...'

'A handful?'

'I dunno, they all seemed to have written novels or to be writing them or talking about writing them. Retirement therapy.'

'Really?'

'Sure. One poor old codger got stuck into it. Death of the novel. Delivered a spontaneous lecture on it.'

'It's been dying as long as I can remember,' Plant said.

'On its last legs now,' Fullalove stressed. 'About to peg out. Along with the rest of literature.'

'Is that so?'

'So they seemed to think. Got quite steamed up about it. This old geezer did, anyway.'

'What old geezer?'

'The poet Prickett.'

'Is he still around? Why's he banging on about novels? I thought he was supposed to be a poet. Or a professor.'

'He was. Both. He used to be a poet until the poets all took up writing novels when the publishers stopped publishing poetry. And he used to

be a professor until the university offered its early retirement incentives to get rid of him. And people like him.'

'Is that so?'

'Seems to be. Anyway, he got quite excitable. Stirred them all up. "I'll tell you why nobody's reading your books any more," he said, "or anybody else's books, for that matter, it's because nobody's taught to read them any more, schoolteachers used to learn English and History, now they study Education, journalists the same, they used to do subjects like Literature and Economics and Politics, now they just do Media Studies, universities used to have huge English departments and they used to teach novels, people developed the habit of reading them, but then came Communications and Literary Theory and Creative Writing and Gender Studies, and no one did any courses that involved reading actual books any more, History, Poetry, forget it, they've vanished, novels are going the same way …"

'Then old Ghostly Sperrit let out an almighty groan and held his head in his hands and said "What century does he think he's living in? Doesn't he know the novel is dead and this is the age of the visual? Movies. Television. Streaming."'

'That's a depressing thought,' Plant said.

'It's not just a thought,' Fullalove said, 'it's the truth. Evolution. Theatre gets replaced by movies which get replaced by television which gets replaced by streaming. And they're all conspiring to replace books.'

'They don't have to be replaced, they could co-exist.'

'Market forces.'

'But the point of education is to offer something other than market forces.'

'Not any more, it isn't,' Fullalove said. 'Now it's all about making money out of foreign students.'

Chapter Seventeen

Plant's landline rang. He answered it.

'Fullalove,' he yelled.

Fullalove refused to carry a mobile phone. But happily gave out Plant's landline number to anyone who might want to contact him.

'Fullalove!' the caller called. Bellowed.

'That's me.'

'That bastard Shameless Seamus, you know what he's done?'

It was the poet Prickett in full force. In full professorial mode. No gaps between sentences. No chance for Fullalove to respond. No need.

'You remember I was talking about the death of fiction and how no one seemed to care and Seamus said he cared, being a novelist now amongst other things, and an arrant scoundrel, anyway, send him a couple of pars, he said, he might be able to do something with it, I doubt it, I said, I'd written a piece myself and no one would run it, bastards, so I sent it to Seamus, the whole thing and you've seen the latest *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*?'

'Yeah,' Fullalove said. 'I thought he had an interesting piece about all that stuff.'

'Interesting piece be damned, that's the piece I wrote, he just re-ran it word for word, didn't change a word except for the by-line, talk about Shameless ...'

'Word for word?' Fullalove asked, just checking.

'Give me your email address and I'll send you my piece and you can see.'

'No, no, just print it out.'

'You want me to post it to you?'

'No, no, I believe you. Bring it along next time we catch up.'

'Sure, when?'

'Whenever,' Fullalove said. 'Next time we have lunch. Did you say anything to Osbourne?'

'You bet I did.'

'What was his reaction?'

'He just laughed, can you believe it?'

Yes, Fullalove could believe it.

'He just laughed? Is that all? What did he say?'

'He said, "Shameless by name and shameless by nature."'

'Yeah, well, I guess when someone's called that, that's what you've got to expect. Is that all?'

'Classic Grub Street he called it, as if that made it any better. "Never know what he's going to come up with next. Or where he gets it from." He seemed to think that that made it good value.'

'Maybe you should have sent the piece in yourself to *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'I did.'

'Ah,' Fullalove said.

There was a silence.

'And what, Osbourne turned it down?'

'Didn't do anything, never responded. I don't think he even looks at freelance stuff that comes in. Just runs his regulars.'

'Ah,' Fullalove said again. Media courtesy. That old tradition.

'Anyway, Osbourne said they'd split the fee between me and Shameless.'

'Well, that's something.'

'Split it? I should get the lot.'

'Yeah, well,' Fullalove said.

There wasn't much more to say. A couple of grunts pretty well said it all.

Chapter Eighteen

Plant enjoyed the calm of the mornings. The background twitter of the birds and cicadas. The gentle sun. The light breeze. And the surroundings, stretching bush, gum trees, wattle, she oaks, and intruders like Plant, camphor laurels, lantana. He liked it all. An indulgence, a delight, not a working farm.

And then Fullalove emerged and stood beside him sharing the view.

'Such a waste,' he said.

'What is?' Plant asked.

'All this bush.'

'Yeah, five acres of it.'

'Lots of land.'

'Yeah. I've never even got as far as the top boundary.'

'And it's unproductive.'

'It's nature. It doesn't have to be contributing to the GNP.'

'But just put in some seedlings.'

'I did. The wallabies ate them.'

'Put wire round them.'

'Then they're noticeable. Obviously dope plants.'

'Who's going to notice them?'

'Neighbours. Helicopters. Drones. Uninvited visitors.'

'You're paranoid.'

'Just sensible.'

'Back in sixteenth-century England it was compulsory to grow it. Defence industries needed it. For rope and sails. Hemp. Canvas. All the same word. Cannabis becomes canvas becomes hemp in the great consonant shift.'

'The good old days.'

'So you sit on your canvas deckchair but you won't grow the cannabis.'

'Absolutely not.'

Fullalove grunted in dissatisfaction. Such a waste. Five unproductive

acres. He poured himself a glass of Mount Warning mineral water from the bottle he kept beside his chair. He refused all attempts by Plant to keep it in the fridge. 'No, chilled water's bad for you. Upsets the stomach. Should be room temperature.'

'Who says?'

'I say. It's obvious. Primitive man didn't have refrigerators.'

'We're not primitive.'

'Really?' Fullalove said, looking pointedly around.

'You need a new case,' Fullalove said. 'Something to occupy you.'

'Whatever,' Plant said, vaguely, disengaged.

'You're depressed. You're under-occupied. You need some excitement in your life.'

'Excitement is what I don't need.'

'You say that, but is it true? Really? You really think that?'

'Peace and tranquillity.'

'Sure,' Fullalove agreed. 'But you need to spice them up a bit.'

'I don't.'

'You may think you don't.'

'No I don't.'

'You don't think you don't? You're getting confused. It's the lack of stimulation. Your brain's turning to mush.'

'My brain is not turning to mush.'

'Too much dope and not enough exercise. Mental exercise. You should be out there looking for stuff.'

'What stuff?'

'Stuff to keep your mind occupied. Find yourself a new case.'

'I'm not sure I want a new case. I'd rather do some library research. Something peaceful. A bit of local history.'

'Like a cold case.'

'Not like a cold case, no. Something restful. Sifting through the archives.'

'Bury yourself in the past.'

'Yes.'

'A living death.'

'I like it.'

'I imagine you do. Sad but true. But it's no good for you.'

Plant declined to answer.

'What is it, anyway?' Fullalove asked.

'What's what?'

'The historical research you're working on.'

'There isn't any. It was just a thought. I'm not working on anything.'

'Ah!' Fullalove said.

'What does that mean?

'It means, I understand.'

'Understand what?'

'Now I understand everything.'

Plant groaned.

'We've got to find you a job. Get you a decent case. Or an indecent one, preferably, something that'll grab your interest and raise your spirits.'

'We?'

'Yeah, we.'

'I don't want a job. I don't want another case. I'm resting. This is my rural retreat.'

'And you're retreating.'

'Yes.'

'That's not good.'

'I don't see why not,' Plant said.

'Because it's surrender.'

'So?'

'Disengagement.'

'Pretty much.'

'That's defeat.'

'You can see it like that if you want. To me it's just a rural retreat. And I'm happily rusticating. I don't want a case or a job or anything.'

'You will do when you see what I come up with.'

'No,' Plant said. 'I don't want you coming up with anything.'

'You will,' Fullalove assured him. 'You're in denial now. But just wait and see.'

Plant groaned some more.

Fullalove chuckled with anticipation.

'And if we don't find you an indecent case to occupy you, I'll have a word to Osbourne and fix you up with something on *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'You haven't even signed on yourself there yet.'

Fullalove wiggled his right hand in some sort of Mr Fix-it gesture.

Plant groaned some more.

The kookaburras took up the chorus.

Chapter Nineteen

'If I take this offer up,' Fullalove said, as if there was any likelihood that he would decline the offer, 'I can fix you up. Really.'

'Fix me up in what way?'

'Get you into print. What else?'

'Oh yes?'

'You used to do a bit.'

Plant conceded that back in the days when the world was wide he had indeed contributed to the odd paper or two, most of them, if not all, now defunct.

'I notice,' he added, 'that you say offer, not job. Are you getting paid?'

'Of course.'

'Regular salary? Or paid per piece?'

'Of course.'

'Which?'

Fullalove shrugged. 'Getting paid is not the only aim,' he said. 'Freelance is perfect. Do it when you can and when you feel like it, but you're not locked into anything. You've got no obligations.'

'Your aim in life.'

'Not so much an aim, just a matter of practicalities.'

'So you're going to take up Osbourne's offer.'

'Can't see why not.'

'Can't you?'

'Well, yes, probably could, but so what? Yeah, I might give it a go.'

'It's the lure of the soapbox, is it? Somewhere you can stand and deliver.'

Fullalove grinned. All lips and teeth and strands of marijuana between them, surrounded by unshaven stubble.

'Is that why? Can I ask why?' Plant persisted.

'You can. You may.'

'So why?'

'Never look a gift horse in the mouth.'

'Go on.'

'Like you said, it gives me a soapbox. Amidst all the bleeding heart liberal bleatings I'll be able to slip in something a bit more substantial.'

'Like what?'

'Like whatever turns up.'

'When?'

'Whenever. On the day. That's the nature of news.'

'And how long do you think you'll last doing that?'

'I guess we'll see.'

'Until you're fired again.'

'No skin off my nose.'

'But you'll end up being sacked.'

'So what? You take the opportunities that offer to hack away at the foundations of the state.'

'Is that what you call what you're planning on doing?'

'That's the idea,' Fullalove said. 'On a good day. But if I get fired, so what? Who'd want to keep working for a paper that fired them? It's not a long term career move. It's an opportunist bit of ...'

He tailed off.

'Bit of what?' Plant asked.

'Probably best not to have a word for it,' Fullalove said. 'No names, no pack drill. Basically,' he said, 'I could do with the cash.'

'You need a source of income.'

'That's what I just said.'

'Like a job.'

Fullalove wrinkled his nose.

'You'd rather have a handout.'

'Not necessarily. Too many strings likely to be attached to a hand out. Even invisible ones you're not aware of. Till it's too late. No, not a handout and not a nine to five job. I've got enough to do with the books.'

'Which aren't bringing in the cash.'

'They will.'

But at the moment they weren't.

The books, the books, he had to do something about getting sales up and running. Their existence weighed on him remorselessly. His prediction that there would be eager readers looking for books that offended current susceptibilities may have been true enough. But how to reach them? He had assembled a splendid store of books but there was no easy way of marketing them and preserving buyer anonymity. Internet orders rather destroyed the whole point of the exercise. But the idea of spending his days sitting in a shop full of salacious classics, socialist propaganda, extremist tracts and whatever else was likely to be deemed unacceptable, and waiting for purchasers to turn up, did not really appeal.

'What do you want to do about eating?' Plant asked. 'Get take-away or go out somewhere?'

'Take-away's tricky,' Fullalove said. 'You need to make sure you only go to places with the food already out on display and point to what you want, don't order something they have to fiddle around at with their back turned to you, or where they send the order out of sight to a kitchen where they can slip something into it. You never know. All the great advantages of modern urban life, instant take-away, home delivery, they've all got their downside. Same with restaurants. You keep going to the same places, they get to know who you are, always a risk. Say you had some investigation going again, not that there's any signs of it, but say you did, some murder or something involving a lot of money, something with a political angle, maybe, then you'd be at risk, somebody might want to remove you from the picture. You get out there being an investigator and nosing around, you could be a target.'

'Maybe I'll cook something,' Plant offered.

'Naaah, no need for that.'

They settled on an Indian restaurant up the coast.

'Good evening, sir. Nice to see you again. The usual?' the owner greeted Plant.

'See what I mean?' Fullalove said. 'I'm not known up here, so no problem. But you ...'

He let it hang there.

Plant disregarded him and nodded agreement. 'The usual.' Vegetarian curry. He ordered the same for Fullalove who undoubtedly was carrying no money. It was an opportunity to curb Fullalove's carnivorousness. No way was he going to subsidize meat eating. And if the meal turned out to have been laced with some lethal substance, then Fullalove's paranoid warnings would have been vindicated. Not that he would ever have the satisfaction of knowing that.

'If we stopped rearing cattle for meat production, there'd be no global warming problem,' Plant said.

'Is that so?'

'Apparently. Cut out all that methane.'

'You've always been so virtuous,' Fullalove said in tones that could only be called disparaging. 'Anyway, I thought you were a climate change sceptic.'

'I'm a vegetarian.'

'So forget global warming.'

'I think it's just a natural process,' Plant said. 'Fire, flood and plague.'

'Exacerbated by capitalist greed. Over-production of commodities,' Fullalove added.

'Of course,' Plant agreed. 'Have you noticed that amidst its other omissions *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* has nothing on animal rights in its virtuous, liberal agenda?'

'Ruling class liberals are not interested in animals, I guess,' Fullalove said.

'They treat animals like they treat their workers.'

'I might use that line,' Fullalove said.

'So you are going to write something for them.'

Fullalove shrugged.
'Could be.'

Chapter Twenty

Shameless Seamus stood in the doorway of the pub dining room. He examined the assembled company for a while before coming over to Fullalove and drawing up a chair beside him. A generous gesture of welcome to a newcomer. Or was it the case that no one else wanted to talk to him?

'Liked that piece in *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*,' Fullalove said.

Shameless looked him full in the face and thanked him.

'Sad business,' Shameless said.

'What's that?' Fullalove asked. A confession of plagiarism? Grand author theft?

'Novel writing,' said Shameless. 'Always stressful. Tragic now.'

'I guess so.'

'Have you ever done any novel writing?' Shameless asked.

'Not really,' Fullalove said.

'Pity. I could do with a co-author. Someone who knows the ropes.'

'What sort of novel?'

'Oh,' Shameless said, 'crime maybe.What do you think?'

What was there he could say? That's interesting? Fancy that?

'Are you interested?' Shameless asked.

'Well, what's it about?'

You never asked novelists what their books were about. He knew that. But how else could he find out when it wasn't yet written?

'Send me three or four pages,' Shameless said. 'The scenario's got it sort of roughed out. See if it's your sort of thing. See what you can come up with.'

A wave of wariness enveloped Fullalove.

'What's your email address?' Shameless asked.

Fullalove gave him Plant's post office box address and land line number. Shameless wrote them down in a little plastic bound notebook he kept in his shirt pocket.

'Could be fun,' he said, fixing Fullalove with a couple of beady eyes.

'Could be,' Fullalove agreed. Polite insincerity. But he was curious, nonetheless.

'I'll give you the scenario and you can see where it's at. Just needs that bit of fine tuning. And a bit more detail, maybe. Bulk it out.'

He waved his hand in a cautious gesture towards the assembled company. Fullalove interpreted it as cautious.

'Flesh out the odd character. Add a bit of local colour. You know the sort of thing.'

It wasn't Fullalove's sort of thing, co-writing, exchanging chapters and thoughts on punctuation. Let alone inviting monitoring and hacking and who knew what else? Who knew what Shameless might import, what unsafe site he might have explored, got sucked into, what he might have done to get himself flagged, and Fullalove along with him?

'Sure, send me the outline,' he said. Not committing himself. But curious. There was always curiosity. And he could always pass it onto Plant. Plant pretty definitely needed something to occupy himself.

Chapter Twenty-one

In due course Fullalove returned to Sydney. Not that Plant was at all sure what 'in due course' meant. Did it mean eventually, or not before time, or promptly? Or none of those, just on the only appropriate day and time? Who knew? Not Plant. Fullalove anyway returned.

With his departure, the mornings resumed their long, slow, gentle awakenings.

Plant stood on his veranda and considered the day, calm, sun-drenched, peaceful. He could simply make a cup of tea and sit there contemplatively with it, confident that there would be little in the vast vacuity of time to require attention, little indeed at all. Fair enough. Or he could venture out somewhere or other.

He ended up at Brunswick Heads. At the bakery. Get a doughnut. Forget running or even strolling. Forget the irritations of Fullalove, now departed for a while. Forget the health police. So he did. Get a doughnut.

He bit into it with care, not wanting jam trickling down his chin as he walked along the stone jetty bordering the river's estuary.

'Plant!' a voice called out.

The jam spurted out and trickled down his chin.

He took a tissue from his pocket and mopped his face before turning round. He already knew who it was from the voice.

'Lucy!' he said, as politely and enthusiastically as he could dissimulate. Had he told her about his morning routines? How else could she have found him down here?

'Are you checking me out?' he asked, ungraciously.

'Me? I could ask the same about you.'

'Really?'

'Well, here we both are, who's the chicken and who's the egg?'

The person beside Lucy gave a groan. Female person. Medium height, dark hair, shoulder length, healthy sun-tanned look but not too sun-tanned, bright brown eyes, prominent cheek bones, a smile.

Supercilious, contemptuous, amused. Plant was never sure about feminine smiles. After all, they did rhyme with wiles. So did masculine ones too, of course.

'Meet Mandy,' Lucy said.

Mandy smiled some more. 'Mandy Mittelnacht,' she said, introducing herself.

'Plant,' Plant said.

Mandy nodded acknowledgement.

'I know,' she said.

How did she know? Plant wondered to himself.

'Lucy's told me about you,' she said.

How did she know he was wondering how she knew? Telepathy, maybe.

'Mandy's a novelist,' Lucy said. 'We were at school together.'

How did those two statements relate to each other? he wondered.

'Why aren't you at your till?' he asked, ungraciously again.

'It's a Sunday, Plant. The Sabbath. A day of rest.'

So it was. Fullalove's stay had disrupted whatever fragile routines he had established. Like knowing what day it was.

'So it is,' he said.

'But you didn't know, did you?'

'Possibly not,' he conceded.

'Possibly not,' she repeated, mockingly. 'What sort of answer is that?'

Mandy smiled. Yes, superciliously he would have said, if asked to describe it.

He had carried on walking, automatically, routinely, unconsciously, and they kept up with him. A couple of men squatted on the rocky side of the jetty at the river's edge, watching the floats of their fishing lines, waiting patiently for the kill. On the other side early morning swimmers swam in the surf and strollers strolled and dog walkers walked along the sandy beach.

'Are you sure you haven't been following me?' he found himself

saying, anxiety gripping him as he gripped the remainder of the doughnut.

There was something about the way they were together there, the two of them, like the way the police patrolled in pairs, and smiling at him knowingly. What was there to know? Why freak out? But he was starting to, smiling back at them and biting on his doughnut. They emanated something. No doubt they would ascribe it simply to his masculine fear of women. But it was something more than that.

'Oh, Plant, attractive as in some ways you are, you're hardly the greatest catch in the ocean. Do people often follow you? Full of desire and eager to experience you? I somehow doubt it, sweet as you undoubtedly are.'

'But if you like, we can make it look as if we're following you,' Mandy said.

'Discreetly,' Lucy added.

'Absolutely,' Mandy agreed.

He could think of nothing to say.

'Oh Plant, the look of alarm and sheer terror on your face. Now you know how I must have felt when you turned up unheralded at the bookshop.'

Terror, sheer terror, is that what he was experiencing?

'No, no,' he said, 'not at all, just surprised, that's all.'

'Caught in the act of guzzling down a doughnut.'

'Well, yes,' he admitted,

It never hurt to admit the obvious when there was no hope of denying it.

'So what are you up to down here?' he asked, switching roles from target to interrogator.

'We could ask you the same question,' she said.

'We' he noticed. Were they in this together, assuming there was anything to be in?

'Are you hot on the trail of some poor unfortunate? Or just filling

your face with carbohydrate? Plant and I go back a long way,' she said to Mandy.

'Oh dear,' Mandy said, looking at Plant dubiously.

'No,' Plant said, 'I'm not on any case.'

'Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?' Mandy said.

'We were at school together,' Lucy said, as if to explain Mandy's comments.

'You already told me that.'

'Boarders,' Mandy said.

Plant grunted

'One of those posh schools,' Lucy added.

'I assumed so,' Plant said.

'I thought you would.'

'But you wanted to make sure.'

She smiled. 'Just filling you in. I could see your look of distaste.'

'Or envy,' Mandy added.

He grunted some more.

'And then we were at university together,' Lucy continued.

'And you've kept in touch,' he offered, feeling it was time to contribute more than just a grunt.

She nodded. Obviously they had kept in touch, here they were together. But why were they both here at one of his regular morning spots? He didn't need to be a Fullalove to be suspicious, sad as that was, to be so suspicious.

The waves pounded at the tip of the jetty, throwing a fierce spray up into the air and soaking the endmost rocks.

Mandy's phone rang. She answered it.

'We've got to go,' she said to Lucy. 'Nice to meet you,' she added to Plant.

'Catch up with you later,' Lucy said to Plant.

He said his goodbyes and smiled and waved as they set off down the causeway. Then he scuttled back home.

Chapter Twenty-two

Back in Sydney Fullalove wasted no time before asking a few questions about Osbourne, checking out anyone who might have encountered him in one of his previous incarnations as publisher or editor or agent. Agent Orange was the obvious first stop to call at. He decided on a personal visit, rather than being fobbed off and hung up on in a phone call.

Agent Orange aka Jacquie Gold was the agent everyone had heard of. Foul tempered, foul mouthed, foul beyond the call of duty, she guarded the gates of publishing with ferocity. Publishing as in marketing and making money. She may have refused to be called a literary agent, indeed she had, those days were past, forget literature, but nonetheless she dealt in books and print and writing. A last residual outpost of a fading world, as far as Fullalove could make out.

Her office was a terrace house in Glebe, down the further end of Glebe Point Road, away from the ambiguous influence of the university. He opened the iron gate in the spiked iron railings and walked along the concrete path between the stones and pebbles and gravel that covered what had once been a front garden, now a maintenance free space, not a living leaf in sight.

She knew Fullalove from way back and wished he had stayed there. Fullalove was not expecting easy access.

'Hell on earth, what are you doing here?' she said. 'Don't tell me you're trying to sell me a book.'

'That's an idea,' Fullalove said, brightly. 'I could collect the pieces I'm writing for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous ...*'

'No,' she cut him off.

'... and make them into a book.'

'No.'

'You haven't even asked what they're about.'

'No, no, no. And I'm not going to.'

'Good to get that clear. But that isn't why I came to see you. If you

hadn't given me the idea ...'

'There is no idea. No, no, no.'

'O.K., fine. But the reason I came is, I've got mint copies of a couple of books that are dedicated to you. I thought you might like to have them, maybe.'

'I don't buy books,' she said.

Which was no doubt true, he reflected.

'They're for free. I just came across them and thought ...'

'How did you "just come across them"?' she asked, suspicion automatic and indeed quite natural.

'I sell books,' he said. 'But these are a gift,' he added.

'You're a bookseller now?'

'Second-hand.'

She sniffed.

'Rare and collectable,' he added.

'Porn,' she said, sniffing some more.

'Sure,' he said, 'what can I get you?'

She did the do not deign to reply number.

'Anyway,' he said, 'I thought you might like them.'

He handed them across to her.

'Blokey O'Kee, Scobie Spruce,' she read, turning them over in her hands. 'Hardly mega-sales.'

'You didn't know they'd been dedicated to you?'

'No, why would I?'

'Hadn't you looked at them?'

'Once they were published? Probably not. The rights had been sold, everything signed, why would I?'

'Didn't the publishers ever send you copies? Or the authors?'

'Could've.'

'So what did you do with them?'

'Put them on a shelf somewhere, I imagine. They could still be there. Or they could've been tossed out? Who knows? I try not to clutter up

the place.'

'Books are clutter?'

'If you let them.'

'Let them what?'

'Clutter up the place.'

He looked round at the uncluttered, not quite paper-free office, the minimal furnishings, the bare walls clear of bookshelves or prints or posters. How unlike his own book-filled rooms.

'And you never opened them?'

'I have now,' she said, putting them down on the side of her desk. 'So what do you want?'

'Gilbert Osbourne.'

'What about him?'

Best to come clean, Fullalove figured. Partially clean, anyway. No point in being subtle with Agent Orange. Ask straight out and be prepared for anything.

'Do you know him? What's he like? Those articles I mentioned I could collect ...'

'Forget them.'

'Osbourne's just asked me to write for his magazine. And I don't really know that much about him, so ...'

'Magazine?' she said. 'What magazine? I don't know about any magazine.'

'*Mad, Bad and Dangerous*,' he said.

'What are you rabbiting on about?'

'That's what it's called.'

'I've never seen it.'

'It's online,' he began, but she was already looking it up on her computer. A new magazine.

'Does it review books?' she asked, momentarily engaged. Somewhere else to promote her authors. Or get them to promote themselves. There was no need for him to reply, she had found the review pages.

'So what do you want to know?'

'Osbourne.'

'What they used to call a dead white male,' she offered.

'What do they call them now?'

'They don't. They're extinct.'

'He's still around.'

'If you say so.'

'Is he any good?'

'Who knows? Who can tell? It's all a gamble in this business.'

'What was he like?'

She looked up at the moulded ceiling and then looked down again and shrugged.

Professional caution, no doubt. Don't make attributable comments about other agents, publishers, editors. The two dedicated books had not been worth their weight in gold.

'You have a bit of trouble with him?' Fullalove asked.

'No, why should I? What sort of trouble would there be?'

'Well, pinching each other's authors.'

'He might have pinched their arses, and undoubtedly did, but he never got any of mine to jump ship.'

'The good ship Jacquie Gold,' Fullalove said.

She seemed uncertain whether to smile or swear, her lips moving, her hand reaching around on the desk feeling for something to throw at him.

'I don't know how good he was, if at all,' she said. 'But he had the contacts.'

'What sort of contacts?'

'Good ones.'

'Meaning?'

'You've got good contacts, you can contact anyone.'

'Not just publishers and media.'

'Anyone. Contacts are contacts.'

'Transcending individual professional interests.'

'Spare me, Fullalove. Where did you steal all those long words from?'

'A dictionary, actually,' he said.

He looked round the office. Not a book in sight.

'Don't you have one?' he asked. 'Would you like me to get you one? Could be kind of useful in your line of work. I can get you one cheap.'

'Fuck off, Fullalove, you obstreperous little shit.'

'Obstreperous, well, maybe you don't need a dictionary after all. I'm quite impressed.'

She found a little wooden box of paper clips on her desk and threw it at him. He ducked, one of his survival skills. The paper clips showered over the floor.

'Would you like me to pick them up for you?' he asked.

'Only if you suck them up through your arse and they puncture your intestines.'

'Maybe not, then,' he said.

'Why don't you just go?'

'Just one last thing and then I will. Promise.'

He smiled his winning smile, all missing teeth and stained enamel and saliva.

'You said it was all a gamble in this business.'

'So?'

'So was he a good gambler?'

'What's a good gambler?'

'Spectacular deals.'

'I don't know about spectacular,' she said. 'One gamble he did that I never saw paid off was buy up a whole lot of rights of out of print titles. One of the conglomerates had taken over various old outfits and they'd acquired backlists they were never going to exploit. So he made them an offer and bought up a swag of rights. Old stuff. Nineteen-thirties, forties, fifties stuff. Tidied up their backlists for them.'

'Like some sort of philanthropist.'

'Couldn't have put it better myself.'

'And then he made a killing reissuing these old masterpieces.'

'Not that I ever noticed. Who would want them?'

'He didn't?'

'No. No, I've seen no signs of any reissues of any of them. The internet killed off reprinting. Too many second-hand copies around. Once second-hand book dealers started listing their stock online, publishers stopped reprinting because there were so many second-hand copies so easily available, all being advertised online for peanuts. No, as far as I can see, this was a gamble that didn't pay off. Or hasn't yet.'

Out on the footpath Fullalove strolled through the mid-morning, enjoying the clear blue skies and bright sunlight and heady traffic fumes of the inner city. A change from the unfamiliar clear air of the country. But his thoughts were not happy ones.

The ongoing decline of the West was not bringing Fullalove the satisfaction he had expected. It was not the first time he had been disappointed. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the survival of Western capitalism had always puzzled him. It had seemed for a while that they were both running downhill, neck and neck. Limping rather. He had adjusted to that and made sure he kept alerted to any signs of Western economic collapse. And indeed things continued to collapse. But it was the superstructure of culture that was collapsing, while the ramshackle, exploitative capitalism continued to seek out new mutations for survival.

And the literary culture, the world of the novel, the weekly review, the daily paper, lay dying before his eyes. The traditional model of independent publishers had been undermined by the development of global publishing conglomerates. They merged and acquired, bought up small independent publishers and closed them down. Transnational predators shedding unwanted clutter, like old books, and the rights to them. That was how Osbourne had acquired those rights. And in

their turn these conglomerate publishers were themselves acquired by entertainment and newspaper and movie businesses, whose concerns were large sales and large profits, which determined the type of book they published, the ones that would make large profits.

Once the government had abolished retail price maintenance, the way was clear for the mass market approach of the conglomerates. They set up discount deals with the chain stores and supermarkets, discount deals that meant they could sell the books well below the recommended retail price that the small, independent bookshops had to charge. The small independent shops couldn't get the discounts that the chain stores got since they didn't move enough copies. They consequently lost sales of the bestsellers to the chain stores and one by one went out of business. So did a lot of the small publishers who couldn't get into the supermarkets with their sort of books, and who had depended on the now vanishing small independent bookshops for sales. While discount internet bookselling provided a further devastating blow to those small shops remaining. So where could you find the sort of books you used to find, who would publish them any more, who would sell them?

For the time being, at least, you could still find some of what had been published in the past in second-hand shops. In Fullalove's hoard, in Mac Arber's Rare and Collectables. And since Mac Arber's was just down the road from Agent Orange, he found himself walking in there.

Chapter Twenty-three

'To what do I owe this honour?' Mac asked as Fullalove came through the door. 'Or should I say dishonour?'

'What are you going on about?' Fullalove asked. 'Who are you calling dishonourable, Macabre?'

'Never mind, never mind, just a figure of speech. Come in, come in, you've had a stressful session with Agent Orange and now you're seeking shelter in Uncle Mac's arbor.'

'How did you know I'd been there?'

'Because your mentor and master Plant follows the same predictable ritual, up the road to Agent Orange, and after the usual uncooperative reception, if you can call it that, rejection rather, he would make his saddened way back down here, his head bowed and his tail between his legs. It's happened so many times, quite an established pattern now.'

He bent over the CD player beneath his counter, and put in a new disc.

'A nice old mystery for you and Plant to get your remaining teeth into,' he said. 'The "Enigma Variations."'

'Thank you,' Fullalove said.

'A thank you from you, my esteemed fellow labourer in the book trade, is worth a thousand ...'

'A thousand what?'

'Oh, you know, something or other. And here you are. In the flesh, as it were.'

'Yes, well ...'

'And what can I offer you?'

'I'll pass on the flesh trade.'

'So what did you have in mind, if not in body?'

'Yo ho,' Fullalove said, which might have been a token of mirth, or an indication that he wanted to get down to business, his business, with no messing around. 'You ever come across a bloke called Osbourne?'

'Which Osbourne bloke would that be?'

'Are there so many?'

'Who knows? Maybe you could narrow your search.'

'Got a bookshop up the coast.'

'Ah, that one.'

'Yes, that one.'

'Yes, he came by. Some time ago. Asked about the business. I thought he might have been going to make me an offer. But he didn't. No one ever does, alas.'

'It must be a lonely life.'

'Not that sort of offer.'

'What sort would that be?' Fullalove asked, innocently as it were.

Mac just looked at him.

'So he had a look round?'

'Indeed. Hardly a look. More like industrial espionage.'

Fullalove's eyes lit up. Or ears perked up. A twitch or two of aroused interest. Espionage!

'Thought that would tickle your fancy,' Mac said.

'It might. Depends what it was that he was snooping around.'

'Books, I imagine. I don't think he was from health and safety looking for rat droppings or cockroaches.'

'Just books.'

'Just books.'

'No particular titles? Not your Curiosa and Curiosa collection?'

'No. Quite indiscriminately.'

'Or inclusively.'

'Yes, very likely, why not?'

'What did you make of him?'

'Nicely spoken. Well presented. Posh. Poshish, anyway.'

'And?'

'Patronizing,' Mac said. '"Nice little number you've got here," he told me. Posh and patronizing.'

Mac was not one to pass by possible slights, not even from old friends, numerous as they were, slights and old friends alike.

'What did he buy?' Fullalove asked, always collecting useful data, anything that might give him a handle on Osbourne.

'Nothing, naturally. Those types never do. Publishers, agents, writers. They all expect to be given books for free. They never even consider paying for them.'

'So what was he up to?'

'Good question. Just snooping around. Much like you, in fact.'

'Me?'

'Yes, you.'

'Well, fancy that,' Fullalove said, as if surprised he should have been thought to have been snooping.

But it was interesting. Fullalove knew what he was snooping around for, information on the book trade and information on Osbourne. But why was Osbourne snooping around, who was he nosing after, and on behalf of whom? If indeed he was snooping. And not just filling in time.

'He might just have been browsing,' Mac offered, doubtfully.

'But he wasn't.'

'I don't know. Possibly not.'

'Isn't your stock listed online?'

'Of course it is.'

'So he didn't need to come in physically and nose around.'

'He might have liked the ambience.'

'Did he say he had a bookshop up north?'

'Yes. He did. I didn't take a lot of notice. A long way for my regulars to go.'

'He doesn't have a website.'

'Is that so?'

'So his stock isn't listed anywhere.'

'Must rely on the passing trade,' Mac said. He turned to look through the window in case there was any out there.

'There is no passing trade,' Fullalove said.

'Oh well. It sounds like amateur night. Or afternoon. A retirement project he hasn't thought through. Maybe he won't be able to keep it going.'

'It wouldn't be that expensive an operation.'

'Oh, don't you believe it. Just trying to keep a bookshop going is expensive enough,' Mac lamented like an old farmer, everything was always too expensive, never underestimate the difficulties and hardships of it all, the book trade.

'So he wasn't just browsing.'

'If you insist.'

'And he didn't buy anything.'

'No, he didn't buy anything. Just looked around. And around. And around.'

'Jeepers creepers,' Fullalove said.

'Something like that,' Mac agreed, pondering.

Fullalove sniffed agreement.

'So,' Mac continued, 'basically what you're trying to say and to get me to confirm is that there's something about him that you're, how shall I put it ...?' He waited.

'I'm not saying anything,' Fullalove said. 'More a matter of wondering.'

'But implying, then.'

'Yes, I guess so.'

'Something suspect. Something, how do you and Plant put it? Something dodgy.'

'Yes,' Fullalove agreed.

Mac stretched himself up and delivered a stern judgement.

'Has it ever struck you that people might think there's something dodgy about you, nosing around bookshops and asking questions?'

'Me?' Fullalove gasped. 'Me?'

Chapter Twenty-four

Mac Arber's words didn't fade away. They hung round Fullalove's consciousness, not exactly reverberating or echoing, just being there.

Not just the dodginess. Fullalove was not unaware that some people might consider him dodgy. He had no doubt that they did. But there were areas and degrees of dodginess. And specifics.

Other people than Fullalove would probably think that Osbourne's lack of online trade was dodgy. But in that case, there were also going to be people who would think that Fullalove's project was dodgy. Probably. Almost certainly. His scheme was to provide dodgy books to purchasers who preferred to be anonymous. But if he didn't have an online catalogue, then he would look as dodgy as he felt that Osbourne was. And in that case those people or agencies professionally involved in tracking down and monitoring dodginess would get into the act. And the last thing he wanted was to attract surveillance onto a project whose whole rationale was the avoidance of surveillance.

Either way he was trapped. If he had no online catalogue, then he would look dodgy. And not only to people like himself. But if he listed his stock online, then he would automatically be open to surveillance, of what he stocked, of what he sold. And given the stock he had assembled, he would definitely look dodgy.

It was a problem without immediate solution. Or any solution, immediate or ultimate.

He rolled up a smoke.

Fullalove didn't mind being thought dodgy. In fact he rather enjoyed it. But he didn't want his book business looking that way and having undesirably dodgy people examining it. And having a second-hand bookshop without a website catalogue might well attract suspicion. He was certainly suspicious of Osbourne's operation. Not that he could see anything dodgy in Osbourne's stock. It was the lack of the dodgy that

struck him as potentially dodgy.

Fullalove's stock had been assembled with a purpose. The sort of books you wouldn't in the current climate, or most climates, want people to know you were buying. *Mein Kampf, Das Kapital* and the rest of the political classics, sex, sex and more sex, and anything else you could think of. Drug writings, of course.

The idea was to supply the books with no record of purchase, no receipts, no names, no credit card records. But it was all too difficult to establish. How could the books be bought without a catalogue? He could rent a shop and sit there all day and wait for people to arrive, suitably masked or balaclava'd, and take cash. But how many people would find the shop? Where would he able to afford the rent in Sydney? Where was a likely place people would go to? And wouldn't it ultimately get staked out, surveillance for law enforcement and divorce lawyers and probation officers, drug squad and the rest of it? It wouldn't be secure. Alternatively he could do all the business by mail, send a money order with your request and you get the book by return. But people had got lazy. They wanted to order online. They didn't want to buy postage stamps and envelopes and money orders. They were downright foolhardy, going online and having it all monitored. Fullalove despaired of them, his market, the public, the human race.

The final impetus to go online came when he was about to sit back and relax with the P. G. Wodehouse novel he had bought from Osbourne's shop. *Thank You, Jeeves*. Tried to buy, and then Osbourne had given it to him. He checked out the publishing information on the verso of the title page, that automatic checking of the second-hand bookseller, just in case it might be a first edition. Not that the paperback could have been. Far from it. A recent edition, in fact. He was just curious about when it was printed. No other reason. And it was here that he read the current publisher's announcement.

> 'Please be aware that this book was published in the 1930s and contains language, themes and characterizations which you may

find outdated. In the present edition we have sought to edit, minimally, words that we regard as unacceptable to present-day readers.'

Fullalove was not easily shocked or surprised or in any way shaken by most things. But this shook him to the core, proverbial or otherwise. He rolled a smoke and thought about it. The horror, the horror.

It shifted the whole bookselling project to a new dimension. Now there was a huge market potential. Who would want to read bowdlerized texts of Wodehouse? Why would you? And a little investigation online established that it wasn't just Wodehouse who was being rewritten. Agatha Christie and Ian Fleming were amongst those who had been despoiled. Surely there would be hordes of people who would deeply resent this interference and who would prefer to buy the original, uncorrupted texts? Eager to buy them. It meant a huge expansion in stock. And a huge expansion in potential purchasers. Not just psychos and weirdos and idealists and activists who wanted the weird and political and deviant. But just booklovers who wanted to read what authors wrote in the past, not some travesty of a text that has been sanitized and sporadically cancelled by some self-appointed politically correct, mealy-mouthed guardians. And he rather doubted that 'minimally' in the publisher's announcement.

The only problem he could see was in guessing who was going to be cleaned up next, so that early authentic printings could be acquired while still available. He began to assemble a list of writers no longer deemed acceptable. P. G. Wodehouse, Agatha Christie, Ian Fleming, John Buchan, G. K. Chesterton, Josephine Tey. And children's writers like Roald Dahl, or Enid Blyton, who, he now discovered, had been targeted for decades. It was going to be a long list. Acquiring all those works was going to keep him busy for quite some time. He could see a whole future in cancelled editions. A vast expanding field. And a new satisfying role for himself as the great preserver, saving the literary culture from distortion and

suppression and oblivion. His original project had been to supply books to people who wanted no record made of their purchases or identity. Now it had expanded into preserving books that were systematically being bowdlerized, rewritten, cancelled, pulped, eliminated. No one else was doing it. He had the field totally to himself. The sole supplier, as far as he could see. A virtual monopoly.

Chapter Twenty-five

Plant lay in the sun, stomach bared to absorb vitamin D, and gestating, cooking up some thoughts. Once he recognized the familiar feeling of despair, and gave up on television and books, and just lay in the sun and closed his eyes and accepted emptiness, boredom, lack of ideas, lack of motivation, once he just gave up and shut his eyes and stopped thinking, then ideas would come. Hopefully. Floating down like specks of ash or wisps of pollen, unsought, unbidden, but accepted. And gratefully so. At last, an idea, a thought, a possibility, a tentative solution. He could have been feeling lost, lonely, missing company, but once he surrendered then company came in the form of ideas. And wasn't that what company was for, or at least was looked forward to and welcomed for? And not in great Eureka moments. The ideas drifted down gently, slowly, even when they contained potentially shattering Eureka revelations.

With Fullalove away back in Sydney, Plant was surrounded by peace and quiet and, he had to admit, emptiness. Sometimes he rather liked it. The pleasures of seclusion. Other times he felt lost, adrift. Maybe Lucy was right, he should see more people. But with Fullalove installed, he had had permanent company. He could've done with a bit less. An evening off, every now and then. Maybe he should go and see her now. Almost certainly he should. And would. No almost about it. Front up to Point Danger. Or maybe call in at the bookshop and miss out on the danger. Unspecified as it was.

But in the meanwhile, and he was spending a lot of time in the meanwhile with its peace and quiet, when the sun disappeared behind the hills he went back indoors and settled down with *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. More danger. Seemed to be unavoidable.

He'd talked about it with Fullalove, he'd heard Fullalove's exhaustive analysis, but he hadn't sat down and studied it. Hadn't looked at it at all. He didn't seek out things to read online. Certainly not news sites and journals of opinion. Didn't seek them out in print any more, either.

As its quotation from Lady Caroline Lamb implied, *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* was a publication committed to challenge. All the causes and attitudes that had sprung out of the seventies' end to the ferment of the sixties. All the causes except the specific anti-war cause that had triggered everything. Denunciation of American military aggression was absent, even though there were plenty of continuing examples of its warmongering through the ensuing years, and would be way into the future. The habit of protest was still there, but located in new causes. It was strong on climate change, asylum seekers, diversity. It espoused feminism, gay rights, transsexuals. It even had a link back to the sixties' anti-racism freedom rides and anti-discrimination activism, but without the radical political edge of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. Black lives matter, denunciations of slave-owning figures from the past, toppled statues, welcome to asylum seekers, and the rest of it.

Was Osbourne an old radical who, when things turned reactionary, buried his past and made his money and had now returned to his old ideals? All the feminist, gay and anti-racist agenda. All assertively progressive, liberal, but with some significant absences, as Fullalove had pointed out. No economic leftism. No advocacy of social housing, free tertiary education. No programme of nationalizing road, rail and air transport, phones, mail, power, fuel, no suggestions in that area at all. And apart from the absence of the heavy stuff, there was no celebration of the sixties' drug culture. Not a mention.

Was Osbourne a progressive who had held off from hard left commitment? Or was he just another conformist, promoting the acceptable liberal notions of free trade, free market, free movement of labour? Did he really buy all that? Or did he figure that the way to success and acceptance was to look as if he bought it? Was he an old radical masquerading as a liberal conformist, running all the safe progressive ideas that had once seemed so challenging, and cautiously excluding anything from the hard left line. Having identified the dominant ideas of the age, he conformed to them, promoting a treasury of safe good causes

while absolutely excluding anything of the old left, old communist, anything really subversive to the current world order.

Or was he just a canny businessman? Maybe he didn't believe in any of it. Was he just pitching the line he pitched in order to attract a convenient covert subsidy? These were the fashionably acceptable middle-class liberal values and so were marketable, financially, and in general status and reputation. Did he figure that the way to success in the current climate was to look as if he bought all that? No one would believe in or accept a conservative ideology any more. And the reactionary was well catered for by existing media.

Plant wasn't familiar with most of the contributors. There was a solid core of women writing but the only one that Plant recognized was Lucy, who cropped up occasionally with a book review. Ghostly Sperrit held forth on movies. And Shameless Seamus contributed on a variety of topics, political and cultural commentary both local and global, from cold wars to trade wars, past and present. While various ageing media figures from the past held forth on the imminent dangers posed by Russia and China and North Korea and Iran. Presumably old hacks from the cronies' lunch, former foreign correspondents and op-ed columnists.

No crosswords, no cartoons, no obituaries, no classified ads, no personal ads, no agony aunt, no poems, no fiction – well, no stories or excerpts from novels, though who knew how factual the articles were. It wasn't Plant's idea of a magazine at all. Reading it was much like being harangued by the national broadcaster. All good enough causes maybe, up to a point, so many of them, excluding any real news that you might want to know. Assuming you could ever get real news anywhere, anyway. Probably not. Plant didn't feel inclined to attempt to find out.

He logged off and went outside to sit in the sun. Listen to the wind in the trees and the chirping lorikeets**.** Cicadas hissing and rattling away like tinnitus. Or vice versa. A crow cawed derisively. Plant rather agreed with it.

Chapter Twenty-six

With Fullalove away Plant was able to get on with his life. What life? he asked himself. Well, Lucy for a start, he told himself. But what was that about? And what was he about? And, rather centrally to it all, what were Lucy and Osbourne about, if anything? Maybe nothing. Maybe not. Whatever it was, he didn't know. Which had a bearing on his next move if there was a next move. If he was ever going to move again.

With nothing much else to do, Plant called by the shop, maybe he'd pick up something to read, have a chat to Lucy. With Fullalove back in Sydney there was no one around to talk to, not necessarily a loss in itself, rural peace being quite welcome to Plant. But every so often there was that urge to communicate, hold forth, analyze, even listen. So up the coast it was.

He couldn't pull up directly outside the shop as there was a classic old Land Rover there, with a stack of boxes being unloaded from it. Lucy was holding the shop door open to let the boxes be carried in. Plant went along the road and parked and waited till the unloading was finished and the Land Rover had driven away. Then he followed Lucy inside, out of the blazing sun.

'What's all this then?' he asked, the boxes stacked just inside the door. 'New stock?'

'That? Oh no, that's just book returns. You just missed Mandy. That's a pity.'

'Book returns? What, you're running a library? Or is this some sort of sale-or-return operation? Are you wholesaling or something?'

'No, we hire them out.'

'So it is like a library.'

'No, not really. No, set-dressing.'

'Go on,' said Plant.

'For movies. We hire them out to the Gold Coast studios. Well, we hire them out to people all over the place.'

'And what, you pack up a few boxes and send them up there?'

'Well, it involves a bit more than that. Quite a fair bit more, actually. It's not just any old books, what they want is authenticity.'

'Go on,' he said again.

'Oh, Osbourne's absolutely punctilious. Has to be. Can't have a book on a shelf that wasn't published till after the events of the movie. Can't give the wrong context – you know, shelves of Christina Stead rather than Mrs Gaskell, or vice versa. And he's got to make sure it's the right dust jacket or the right paperback edition because they changed the cover designs on reprints sometimes, and the American and British editions are usually different. And there are always going to be some freaks out there with nothing better to do than to look for discrepancies, spending their life diligently searching for errors they can expose, stuffed-up continuity or whatever. And let me assure you there are plenty of such nutcases out there. So we've got to be meticulous.'

'And you just take the books off your shelves?'

'Heavens no. That's all been done. Osbourne's got the different categories already sorted. You know, leather-bound Victorian editions for costume drama. Hardbacks with dust jackets, hardbacks without dust jackets. Shiny paperbacks. Shabby paperbacks. So if they're setting a movie in the 1950s, they want shelves of 1950s titles, not later reprints.'

Plant looked round the shop. 'So where do you keep them?'

'Not here. This is just the sales stock. He keeps the hire books at the *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* office.'

'What, in a warehouse?

'No, no, he has them all on display. Like a library. So movie directors can look in and see what they're getting. Assuming they can be bothered. Hardbacks here, paperbacks there, ancient here, modern there, they're all set out there. Then you can just go along with a tape measure and collect how many metres of display books you want. You just go into the room and say, "I'll have that row and that shelf and those there", or whatever. Or have a look at a photograph of them. Then Osbourne packs

them up in boxes and drops them off here. And if he needs another three metres of Penguin crime, or an extra couple of shelves of mixed book club editions and 1950s hard backs, he can go round collecting them off the shelves here. Then Mandy comes and drives them up to the studios and returns them here when they're finished.'

'Why return them here?'

'Because Osbourne's in and out of the office all the time. But there's always someone here to receive them. Like me. Then Osbourne picks them up and takes them back to his office.'

'Neat,' Plant reflected. 'So did Mandy set this up?'

'Mandy? Heavens no. I arranged that. She needed a part-time job and we needed a casual driver. She's just the go-between. I mean, I'd have had to shut up the shop if I was going to deliver the books myself. And Osbourne's too busy to drive up and down the Gold Coast delivering books. It takes him long enough to assemble them. Got to be precise and careful.'

'So all in all, convenient for Mandy.'

'Well, I think she hopes it will get her some contacts in the movie business and she can sell the film rights of her novels.'

'And has she?'

'Not yet. Not that I know of.'

'But she really believes that?'

She tipped her head first to one side, then to the other. Plant interpreted it as meaning something like, 'Why not?'

'Do you believe it?' he asked.

She smiled, as if that would do for an answer.

'And you set it all up?"

'Me? No, no, the movie deal was all in place when I started here. Osbourne had fixed it with some of his contacts.'

'Neat,' Plant said again.

'I thought so. A nice little earner.'

'So where's he live?'

'Out past Murwillumbah, on the way to Nimbin.'

'Oh yes. And is there a Mrs Osbourne?'

'I think there might have been, but I'm not sure.'

'But not any more.'

'Apparently not. Not in residence, anyway.'

'So what's he got, a farm or something?'

'Property,' she said. 'Farms have animals and stuff. Not really his thing.'

'Macadamia plantations?' Plant suggested.

Lucy laughed. 'He just likes the primal forest.'

'Primal? Hardly primal.'

'You know what I mean. Just trees and creepers and stuff. Rain forest.'

Plant knew what she meant. He lived amongst it. Though he had never thought of it as primal.

'So amidst the rain-forest jungle he has this library of rare and old books.'

'No, the books are all in the office at Byron. And new ones. That's where those review copies come in useful. Most of the movies have contemporary settings, so they need new books for them. When they have books.'

'Why doesn't he keep them on his property? He could have a couple of rooms as dedicated libraries for movie directors to look through and claim the lot against tax.'

'I think he likes to keep his place private. And it gives the office a touch of something.'

'And are there enough movies being made to make it all worthwhile?'

'Worthwhile?'

'Profitable.'

'Must be. Otherwise why would he do it?'

'Australian movies. Or American?'

'Whoever needs books. We're not fussy. And not just movies. There are people doing podcasts, and CEOs holding forth online, and they all

like to have a display of serious-looking books behind them.'

'Because they don't actually own any books.'

'Probably not. But they like the display. Looks more serious than art works.'

'It could be good publicity for a writer, getting one of your books featured on a movie set. Product placement,' Plant speculated.

'Yes, the poet Prickett has already tried hustling us for that one. But mainly all you see is the spine of a book in a bookcase in the background. They're not exactly featured.'

'I guess so.'

'I can assure you it is so.'

'And how did the poet Prickett take that?'

'Just keeps on hassling. Started pestering his publisher to put his name larger and brighter on the spine when they reprinted.'

'Did they?'

'What, reprint? You're kidding. But he's ever hopeful.'

'You know him, then.'

'Can't say I know him. He drops by every so often. I'm never sure whether he's looking for copies of his books to pinch, or he's smuggling in unsold copies and sticking them in the shelves to try and entrap some readers.'

'Really? Would he do that?' Plant asked.

'A lot of writers do,' Lucy said.

'What's it like?' he asked. 'Osbourne's place. Nice place? Rolling acres?'

'More like bush, bush and more bush, I imagine. I've never actually been there.'

'Really? Why not?'

'Never needed to.'

'Never invited?'

'No.'

'Doesn't he entertain?'

'I've no idea.'

'And it's a profitable business?'

'What do you reckon?'

'I imagine it pays. But why don't you just sell the books outright to the studios?'

'Because then the studios would be stuck with them. What do they do when the movie's finished? Try and sell them back to us? Pay us to take them off their hands? Hiring them's less hassle. Everyone knows where they stand, cost wise.'

'All very civilized.'

'Up to a point. Depends what you call civilized. Could be a murder mystery they're making. Someone struck on the head with a heavy volume. Or crushed by an avalanche of heavy volumes from a falling bookcase.'

'What about book burnings?' Plant asked. 'Do you provide stock for that?'

'I'd have to ask Osbourne. I'm not sure the issue has ever come up.'

'Not yet.'

'Maybe not.'

'Oh, it will,' Plant assured her. 'It's too good a visual potential, a burning pyre of books. An image for our times. The sort of thing the movie industry and the streaming services would promote, showing how to get rid of old out of date stuff like books and print, stick with the internet.'

'What a dreadful idea,' Lucy said, looking aghast at Plant. He grinned back.

'So, do you only do books? What about newspapers? You know, for when they want to do a close-up of the headlines.'

'No, not us. They probably photograph what they want and then print a copy. Print a new front page. Old newspapers get too fragile to have on a set. Hard to find them, too. No, they're a separate business.'

'But someone has to go and find the relevant issue and dig it out.

Must be money in that.'

'Sure. Not my job though. I'll stick with books, thanks.'

'Porcelain, flower arrangements, antiques, paintings, bicycles, motor cars,' Plant reflected. 'Someone's making money out of supplying all these things.'

'Presumably,' she said.

'Amazing.'

'Thinking of a career change?' she asked him.

'You never know,' he said.

She laughed. One of those knowing laughs.

'So,' she said, 'you trying to trap me or something, dropping by without warning?'

'No, not at all, why would I be doing that?'

'It's what you do, though, isn't it, when you're working a case?'

'But I'm not on a case.'

'So you say.'

'Promise.'

She laughed.

'You can sound quite sweet, you know.'

'Thank you,' he said. Maybe politeness was the way to assure her of his sincerity.

'But you do ask a lot of questions.'

'Habit of a lifetime,' he said.

'So you've simply been hanging out all day until you could decently drop by for an after-work drink. Or in your case an after-work smoke, since you mention habits of a lifetime.'

She registered the undisguised look of alarm, fear even, in his face. She laughed.

'Or have you been frantically, ferociously busy on a case and could only just tear yourself away, maybe even for only forty minutes?'

'I don't have any cases.'

'Why do I keep forgetting that? Is it that I doubt it, at some level? At every level, for that matter.'

'Honestly,' Plant said, a plea from his childhood, why don't they ever believe me?

'I bet you say that to all the girls.'

'No,' he said again.

'And to anybody else who asks.'

He shook his head and smiled wanly. At least, he was pretty sure it was wanly. But you could never be quite sure with these old and fading words.

'So this is just a social visit.'

'No "just" about it.'

'I mean you have no hidden agenda. Apart from the usual.'

'The usual?'

'Male hormones.'

Plant figured it best just to blink.

'So what are you up to if you don't have a case?'

'Nothing much.'

'Aren't you bored?'

'Yes. But I'm getting used to it. I think I rather like it.'

'Being bored?'

'And not having a case.'

'What's to like about that?'

'Oh, just not having a case. No stress. No anxiety. No worries.'

'So nothing.'

'Pretty much.'

'Nothing will come of nothing.'

'I know. Neat, isn't it? Makes it all quite relaxing.'

'Why don't you put your stock list on the internet?' Plant asked.

'Too much work, all that time and labour, not worth the effort for the return. It's fine if you've got large ticket-price items, but with books,

not worth it. Not with the ones we sell, they're hardly rare or antiques. Our customers just like to come in and browse.'

'But wouldn't it make the accounting easier?'

'Probably just make more work.'

'Who does the accounting?'

'Oh, Osbourne does all that. I give the customers a receipt if they ask for one. Some do. Claim the purchase against tax or for some grant or other. But most are just buying books to read for pleasure. Cheap books.'

'And are there enough of them?'

'Oh, yes. Absolutely.'

He looked round. There never seemed to be anyone there when he called in.

'It fluctuates,' she said. 'Though we could always do with more, of course,' she laughed. That loud, resonating laugh of the squatter's daughter, pitched to reach across the stretching acres. Hectares. Whatever they were measured in now.

'Do you cancel books as well as sell them?' Plant asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Like delete them. Burn them.'

'Burn them! No, we don't burn them, never.'

'What about books you dispose of, like ...?'

He wasn't sure what to list, but she was already answering him.

'Well, we wouldn't buy them in the first place if we were going to dispose of them, would we?'

'What if they came in a job lot, what do you do? Pass them on to a charity shop?'

'If we don't want them, I'm sure the charity shops wouldn't want them either. They're getting really fussy about what they'll accept. And they end up sending eighty per cent of the books people give them into landfill, anyway.'

'So what do you do?'

'We don't do anything. It's not an issue.'

'But what if there was stuff just cluttering the shelves ...'

'It wouldn't be on the shelves, we choose what we put on the shelves.'

'How?'

'How?'

'On what principle.'

'No principle. I just sift through them.'

'For what?'

'To see if we're likely to sell them. Then when I'm done, I put them on the shelves. Keeps me up to date. And the shop.'

'You're not sifting them to see they're not unsuitable?'

'Unsuitable? Oh, Plant, what a mind you've got. What would I think unsuitable? What a romantic you are to imagine anything unsuitable would emerge from today's publishers.'

'And the stuff you don't put on the shelves?'

'It goes in the two dollar tray out the front. Bargains, Plant.'

'And the unsaleable?'

'Everything sells. It's not an issue. Maybe once in a while Osbourne's bought someone's library and there's old, tattered stuff in it, too damaged to sell. So he sends it off to recycling.'

'So once in a while you do cancel stuff.'

'Only once in a very long while if at all,' she said.

'But they get pulped. Or used as landfill.'

'Oh, don't be so squeamish, Plant, or whatever it is you're pretending to be. Pulping's always been an integral part of the book trade. Or used to be. Misjudgements. Remainders. Those overruns. When you had to do a big print run to get a low unit cost, and then the books didn't sell. Recyclers came and picked them up. All that's changed now with digitization, you can print as few or as many as you like at pretty much the same unit cost. You do a careful initial run, and if it takes off, you just press a button and print some more. Print on demand. None of the old hassles of hot metal and linotype and filmsetting. All digital now. No need for pulping any more.'

'Ah, the wonders of publishing,' Plant sighed.

'Talking of which,' Lucy said, 'are you coming to Mandy's reading?'

'What reading?'

'She's reading from her new book.'

'Ah, well ...'

'Don't bullshit, Plant, you're not busy.'

'Well ...'

'You claim you're not on a case, you've got nothing else to do ...'

'Where's it being held? Here?'

'Here? How could we fit in a reading here? There isn't any room anywhere to sit and listen. It's all narrow spaces between the shelves.'

'True,' Plant agreed.

'And in a second-hand shop,' she continued. 'Dead writers, probably most of the books are by authors who are dead already. Or near enough.'

'And they'd feel offended having a live writer coming in and stealing their thunder?'

'It wouldn't work,' Lucy insisted. 'Anyway, Mandy's arranged a sweet deal with this night-club up at Surfers Paradise.'

Plant's heart sank even lower. First a reading, now a night-club.

'How are the night-clubbers going to take that?'

'It's in the afternoon,' Lucy said. 'It's only a night-club at night, obviously. In the daytime it's like a cafe, people just drop in.'

'And get read to?'

'There are worse things in life than that,' Lucy said. She spoke as if she might be about to list them.

'Sure,' Plant said hurriedly.

'That means you'll come?'

'Sure,' Plant said yet once more.

After all, what else did he have to do?

Chapter Twenty-seven

Now that calls from phone boxes had been made free, Fullalove made full use of them. It enabled him to keep in touch with Plant from the city, frequently, all too frequently. An incitement to indiscretion, of course, have to be careful, it could all be an entrapment operation, has there ever been such a thing as a free call? He made a point of searching out a different phone box, preferably in a different suburb, every time he called.

'I've been thinking about your girlfriend's shop,' he began one morning.

'She's not my girlfriend.'

'Whatever.'

'No, not "whatever"'.

'Sure, sure, all pure and platonic. Anyway, I've been thinking, why are they not online? They've got to be dodgy.'

'You're not online either.'

'I am now.'

'What?'

The tranquillity of the trees and the bushes and the birds and the bees and the rest of it was shattered. Fullalove online!

'I thought you'd told me time and again that that was suicide. Self-incrimination. I thought you said everything was tracked.'

'Yeah, well.'

'And the purpose of your operation was to sell dodgy books to people who didn't want to be tracked when they bought the dodgy sort of books they wanted.'

'Yeah, well, two things. One, I wasn't getting any sales unless I opened a shop and I can't afford one anywhere where anyone might come to it. So I've got a house full of books and I've got to get them moving soon.'

'Or you'll be crushed to death by them?'

'Whatever. And two, now there's all this squeaky-clean rewriting

going on. Bowdlerizing they used to call it. And that opens up a whole different market. Huge. Not just weirdos like us. But ordinary, literate people who want the original versions. The version the author wrote. The authentic one, not the censored one that cuts out the so-called unacceptable words and thoughts. And they're just readers, scholars, serious folk, not urban terrorists and rabid radicals. So to reach them I've got to go online.'

'Change of plan.'

'Yeah. Anyway, it's nearly up and running. So, what I'm thinking is, if I can't manage without a website, how can your lady love?'

'She is not my ...'

'Sorry, lady friend. How do they manage?'

'They've got a shop.'

'Anyone ever go to it?'

'I've been there. You've been there.'

'Anyone else? You ever see anyone in it?'

Plant thought back.

'Probably not.'

'So, I ask again, how do they manage? What are they up to?'

'I can see why you might be interested,' Plant said tentatively.

'I'm more than interested, man, I'm ...'

'Obsessed?'

'No, I'm not frigging obsessed.'

'Mildly curious, then.'

'More than curious.'

'On to something.'

'Could be.'

'But you don't know what.'

'Not yet, maybe. But I'll get there.'

'I've found out one interesting thing,' Plant said.

'Go on.'

'Osbourne's got this deal with the movie studios. Hiring out books for set-dressing.'

'Has he, now?' Fullalove said, his ears pricking up beneath his beanie. 'Tell me.'

Plant told him.

'Book-hiring.' Fullalove said, reflectively. 'That's amazing. Who's the contact in the studio? Can you find out their name? I might give them a call.'

Plant was stunned.

'You don't really think you can hire out your rabid and reactionary and racist and radical and otherwise revolting stock to the movie industry?'

'Yes. Why not? That's the extremist stuff they like these days.'

'You're crazy. And if someone ever did hire them for a movie, there'd be someone coming round soon after to set fire to them.'

'That could be a buzz in itself.'

'No it wouldn't. It would be painful and life-threatening and the end of your business.'

'Maybe,' said Fullalove. 'Just a thought.'

He had another thought.

'I could set up shelves of left-wing stuff, you know, old commie classics for a movie about the McCarthy purges. Or rabid right-wing Nazi stuff for a World War II movie. It could be really creative.'

'That would be your downfall.'

'What would be? Why am I going to have a downfall?

'Getting creative about extremist political ideologies. Who knows what would be the end of that?'

'You're probably right. Pity though,' Fullalove conceded. 'Mind you, there's all the sex stuff, too. Henry Miller and Fanny Hill and *My Secret Life* and the rest of it. That's got possibilities. Background furnishings for *Rogered while Researching*. Or how about *Bonked in the Bookshop* or *Nazi Nooky*? Or *Commie Couplings*? And then there's the dope stuff.

Perfect for a seventies drug movie. I can see a huge potential for book-hiring here. Could give that extra cultural dimension to the porno-movie business. I wonder,' he wondered. 'But probably not,' he reflected, 'probably not. We'll see.'

Fullalove had made a decision. Not without doubt, not without uncertainty. But he could see no alternative. Online it was going to be. Well, purchasers could order from an internet cafe or a library, they needn't use their home connection. Pay by money order or even banknotes. Have the books mailed to some post office box or address of convenience. He would have to set up credit-card facilities, other payment options. He could promise to keep no records, neither of orders or dispatch. Books mailed in plain packages. No return address. No identification of source or content.

It was the best he could do. And he kept at it. Over the weeks. And weeks. And weeks. Keying in titles and authors and prices.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Plant was on his veranda considering mowing the grass he would soon have to mow again before it got out of control when Lucy came walking up the track.

'Plant,' she called, 'is that you?'

Plant confirmed that it was.

'I parked on the road. I wasn't sure whether this was your place or not so I didn't want to just drive in regardless.'

'Yes, it's mine. Here I am. How did you find me?'

'Mandy told me.'

'Mandy? She's never been here.'

'Maybe not.'

'Definitely not.'

'OK, definitely not.'

'So ...?'

'You must have told her enough, so no problem.'

'I can't see how.'

'You'd be surprised.'

'At what?'

'At how we can track people down.'

'We', he noticed. He didn't like the sound of that. He didn't like the sound of any of it one bit. It sounded too calculated. Almost professional.

She sat down in one of the canvas deckchairs.

'I just had lunch with her and I thought I'd drop in and see you on my way back home.'

'Nice to see you.'

'Well, I thought I'd better remind you about her reading from her new book. I thought if I came and reminded you in person, you might actually come. Whereas if I just phoned or left a message you'd probably have ignored it. That's so, isn't it?'

Plant conceded it probably could be the case.

'So you're coming.'

Plant made non-committal noises.

'Just come,' she said.

He was struck by the force she could put into just two words.

'Sure.'

'I mean it,' she said.

He wasn't sure why he should be pushed around like this but there was nothing to be gained by resistance.

'Of course,' he said.

She did the fixing him with a steely-eye number.

'A coffee would be nice,' she said.

'Tea or mineral water. Or tank water,' he said.

'Tea, then.'

Plant busied himself in the kitchen. She followed him in.

'Are you checking me out or something?' he asked.

'Checking you out? Why would I be doing that? Watching how you pour boiling water over a tea-bag.'

'Generally,' Plant said.

'Generally?'

'Not my tea-making skills.'

'I really don't know what you're talking about, Plant,' she said. The 'really' came out very posh and English sounding, something she'd picked up in those years in Oxford.

'So this is your Sunday off?' Plant said.

She agreed that it was.

'Don't people buy books on a Sunday?'

'Not from us,' she said.

'Aren't you losing business?'

'You want me to work a seven-day week?'

'Can't you get Mandy to stand in for a day? Or Osbourne?'

'You're joking,' she said.

'Just a thought.'

'Are you offering? I can't say that I can see you in the shop.'

'Me? No way. I'm having a break.'

'Don't you need the money now you haven't got a case?' she asked, rather directly, Plant thought.

'I'm fine,' he said.

'You could always write for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. How well do you know Osbourne?'

'No. Not at all. To both those questions.'

'But he's an old acquaintance of your friend Fullalove's, isn't he?'

'If you say so.'

'But not of yours?'

'Not at all. Neither now nor then.'

And why do you want to know? he wondered.

'Not sure it would support my lifestyle. Such as it is,' he added, noticing Lucy looking around. She really did seem to be checking him out. He knew the signs. It was the sort of thing he did himself. Probably without her keen eye for furnishings and kitchen appliances.

He took the tea out onto the veranda and tried some of his own checking out.

'So how did you end up with a job here? How did you find Osbourne?'

'Find him? I didn't really. I just drifted up here and there he was.'

'And you just bumped into him.'

'Yes,' she said, 'something like that.'

'Like what?'

'Like bumping into someone. Like bumping into you.'

'Well, it's more like I bumped into you,' Plant said.

'Whatever. It has the same effect.'

Plant wondered about that. But it wasn't the time to debate it. Reserve it for later. When he could think about it on his own.

'So Osbourne just happened to be up here.'

'Amazing, isn't it?'

'When you arrived.'

'Yes. He'd been here a while, actually.'

'You hadn't seen him since England?'

'No.'

'Had you seen much of him there?'

'On and off. He was a friend of Archer's.'

'Your husband.'

'Yes.'

'And his former student.'

'Yes.'

'Like you.'

'Indeed.'

'So what was he up to back then?'

'Osbourne? Publishing.'

'So he wasn't up to any funny business? Your husband hadn't recruited him?

Or you, for that matter? Not spookery.'

She laughed.

'Well, if he was he wouldn't be telling people, would he? Just publishing as far as I know.'

'Unlike your husband.'

'Nobody was like my husband.'

'Really?'

'I hope not. One was enough. Are you sure you're not on a case, Plant?'

'No, I've told you, I'm not.'

'It's just a habit, is it, this interrogation you put people through?'

'I guess so.'

'You guess so. Never anything definite with you, is there?'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'There you go again.'

'How about Mandy? Did you just bump into her?'

'We were at school together.'

'Oh, of course. I forgot.'

They chatted away for a while, the sun dropped behind the hills and she headed off.

'And don't forget Mandy's reading,' she reminded him as she left.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Mandy's books were laid out for sale on a table, Lucy attending, from the latest, Mittelnacht, *At the Oasis* to her earlier successes, *Moll Gallipoli* and *Midnight Cowgirl*. He remembered who she was now. Author of that breakthrough first novel about being on the game, *Moll Gallipoli*. The sexsational novel of the year, back when such works were sexsational and still being published, before the great repression had begun.

'Come on, Plant,' Lucy said, 'pull your fingers out of your pants and stick them into your wallet and do the decent thing.'

'What decent thing would that be?'

'Buy Mandy's books. You won't regret it.'

'Why would I regret it?'

'Who can tell with someone like you? Come on, fork out. She fancies you, you know.'

'Fancies me?'

'Not in that sense. Ever hopeful, aren't you? No, she fancies you as a character. As a private investigator. For her next novel. She could write up one of your cases. Or a whole series of them. Turn them into bestsellers. Or is Fullalove going to do that? Shameless said they were collaborating on a novel. But you'd do better with Mandy.'

He dug out his wallet and paid the price.

'I'll think about that,' he said.

And the trouble was, he would. It was a terrible idea, the last thing he'd want. And inevitably he would find himself thinking about it.

'The last person who thought of using me in a novel ended up dead,' he said.

'Mandy's a survivor,' Lucy assured him.

A terrible idea. And what if he weakened and succumbed to her charms and agreed to it?

Lucy left the book table and handed it over to Mandy. And Mandy was

soon engaged in conversation with the poet Prickett. They stood facing each other in what looked like intense concentration. Plant sidled up closer.

'Just a little space at the end,' Prickett said.

'No.'

'It won't take space away from yours,' Prickett said.

'It will. And I'm not doing it.'

'Just for my book. Then we can sell both yours and mine. I've got my *Collected Poems* in the car. I'll go and bring some.'

'No way,' Mandy insisted. But Prickett had already set off for the door.

Shameless replaced him at the table. 'Can you just let me have a copy while I'm here.'

'You want me to give you a copy?'

'A review copy,' Shameless said.

'But you don't want to pay for it.'

'Not for a review copy.'

'So does that mean I get a review?'

He smiled.

'Maybe send me a few suggestions.'

'How many's a few?'

'Two or three pars, maybe,' Shameless said.

'Like the standard 750 words?'

'That would be good,' Shameless said, smiling some more.

She held out a copy of her latest.

'So do you still need this?' she asked.

'Might as well,' he said, taking it and walking off.

'Might as well,' she muttered under her breath, 'might as well,' as if it were some sort of imprecation. The phrase resonated. Maybe she could use it as the title of a book. Why not? Could be a trilogy. *Might as Well, Why Not?* and something else. Well, *Something Else*, why not? Might as well. *Might as Well, Why Not?* and *Something Else*. She scowled at

Shameless, who had already gone, and at Plant, who smiled back.

'So, are you going to be co-authoring Shameless's new novel?' Plant asked. 'Or hasn't he got around to asking you yet?'

She glowered across at him, saying nothing.

'Apparently not,' he said.

She just looked at him. If looks could kill. That sort of look.

'So, no it is. Got all that sorted,' he said, 'good.'

Lucy came back to the book table with Uncle Toby in tow, down from Brisbane. Professor Toby Oates. He looked like a splendid retrospective of the white man's burden from a past century in his Bombay bloomers, safari shirt, sandals and long socks.

Mandy handed control of the bookselling table back to Lucy and greeted Uncle Toby with evident relief, a welcome improvement on Shameless, or, for that matter, Plant. They were soon deep in discussion about the best places to eat in Kazakhstan.

Am I imagining this, am I really hearing this? Plant wondered.

'You two planning a cookbook?' he asked.

'You tell us,' Uncle Toby said. 'He's a private investigator, you know,' he told Mandy.

'Terrifying thought, isn't it?' she said. 'But underneath I'm sure he's a big softie.'

Uncle Toby turned his smile onto Plant.

'She'll be writing about you, next,' he said.

'How does he know that I haven't already begun?' she asked.

Plant reached out a hand behind him for a chair to sit down on. Mandy and Uncle Toby spun around him in some Dervish dance-step they'd picked up on their travels, and sat down beside him, one on each side. It felt like he was under restraint. Armed guard. Not that they seemed to be armed. But they wouldn't, would they?

'How's business?' Uncle Toby asked.

'No business,' Plant said. It came out like a gasp.

'What's he say?' Uncle Toby asked.

'He says he's got no business,' Mandy said.

'They always say that. Par for the course. They never tell you what they're up to.'

Plant smiled politely.

'But you can be sure that they're up to something.'

He took a careful look round the room.

'No doubt there's some poor soul here he's pursuing.'

'You think?'

'Without a doubt.'

'No,' Plant said.

'Don't believe him,' Uncle Toby told Mandy.

'I don't,' Mandy said, smiling at Plant.

Plant tried smiling back but it didn't do any good. They didn't believe him. He could tell from their expressions.

'So what are you two up to?' he asked.

'See,' said Uncle Toby. 'He's always investigating. Can't ever stop.'

But whatever they were up to, they never told him.

Shameless loomed up and began to sound out Uncle Toby about collaborating on Shameless's new novel. And then Osbourne joined them and began asking Uncle Toby about contributing to *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.

Mandy turned to Plant and chuckled.

'They won't get anything out of Uncle Toby,' she said, *sotto voce*.

'No?'

'No way. He's far too wily to put anything in writing.'

'Really? How's he hold down an academic job without writing anything?'

'I don't think that's too hard. And he probably got in there early before people worried too much about publishing. It's all about getting research funds and travel money now. He's always trotting round the globe giving conference papers. Just never publishes anything.'

The poet Prickett came back in from the car park with half a dozen copies of his *Collected* in a supermarket shopping bag. He took one out and held it before him as he approached Ghostly Sperrit. Ghostly recoiled in horror. Real or simulated, it was a substantial recoil.

Looking round anxiously for an escape route Ghostly settled on Mandy behind the book table.

'Mandy. I was looking for you. Have you ever thought of turning one of your novels into a movie?' he asked, picking up *Moll Gallipoli* and leafing through it. 'Maybe I could help ...'

'Now that's an idea,' Shameless said to Ghostly. 'Are you looking for suitable subjects? I've ...'

The poet Prickett, finding himself abandoned, turned his attention to Osbourne. 'Have you ever thought of running some poems in *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*? I mean, the Byron connection and all that, I could ...'

Osbourne smiled. 'Why not? I'll have a think about it,' he said with his usual bland politeness, and somehow avoiding accepting the volume that Prickett was thrusting at him. He looked round the room, cautiously. Apprehensively. Lucy waved at him and beckoned him over. He went across to her. Then she spotted Plant and beckoned him over, too.

'Excuse me,' Plant said, getting up from his chair.

'See what I mean?' Uncle Toby said to Mandy. 'Always on call, these chaps.'

'Osbourne, Plant,' Lucy said, introducing them to each other. 'You two know each other, or don't you?'

'I've heard of you,' Plant said.

'He's Fullalove's friend,' Lucy told Osbourne.

'Ah, Fullalove, yes, clever chap that, talented, too.'

He looked at Plant as if to make sure they agreed, were talking about the same person, had got their stories straight.

'Absolutely,' Plant confirmed.

'Well, now that's settled I'll leave you two to it,' Lucy said.

'Two, two, too-wit,' Osbourne said. 'Let's go get a drink.'

'Don't you want to buy a book?' Lucy asked.

'Pass on that, read 'em all already.'

'Really?'

'Would I lie to you?'

She looked him in the eye. He held his gaze steady and smiled.

'You've already foisted a couple on poor old Plant here, how many more do you want to sell?'

'All of them, of course.'

'Well, good luck with that.'

Plant stood there looking virtuous. Books in hand. Osbourne gave his virtuous look, too, hands free of any burden.

It was a small crowd. Fit audience though few. A dozen or so people sitting around sipping coffee and chatting. Two or three at the bar.

'Not really my sort of thing,' Osbourne said.

'What, this night-club?' Plant asked.

'No, I'm all for night-clubs. Might come back later, what do you think? But no, not readings, not this poetry reading business.'

'She's a novelist.'

'Much the same, really. You sit there and they drone away. Why can't they just let us read the stuff in peace and quiet?'

'You're not a performance enthusiast?'

'Not for this sort of stuff. A strip show, maybe.'

He fixed Plant with a steady gaze.

Plant gazed back.

'So you haven't thought of having a series of *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* readings here? Or somewhere?' Plant asked. All innocence and bright ideas.

'What, as a strip show? Might have suited Lady Caroline Lamb but I'm not sure our contributors would be up for it.'

'Not even Shameless?'

'Ah well, the jury's out on that one. Possible. Certainly possible.'

'I think he's been angling for a session, from what Lucy tells me.'

'Don't doubt it for a minute. Determined chap, our Shameless. Wants to do a strip, does he?'

'A reading, I think.'

'Ah well. Beggars can't be choosers.'

They sipped their drinks. Some sort of red wine.

'More of a shed red than a house red, wouldn't you say?' Osbourne said.

'Outhouse red, maybe,' Plant suggested.

'Chateau Leanto,' Osbourne offered.

They drank it anyway.

'So, Fullalove,' Osbourne said.

'Yes,' Plant said.

'So what's he up to? These days,' he added, as if to preclude any summary of Fullalove's historical activities.

'Not up to anything.'

'Is that so? What's he doing up here?'

'He's been staying with me.'

'Is that so? And what are you up to?'

'Nothing at all.'

'Nothing at all? Doesn't sound too good.'

'No, it's fine. Suits me.'

'A life of indolence.'

'Pretty much.'

'So what did you do before you did nothing?'

'Not a lot,' Plant said.

'Unemployed at first.'

Plant nodded.

He could have been more forthcoming. He had no need to conceal what he did, even if he wasn't doing anything much at the present.

Anything at all. But something in Osbourne's persistent questioning triggered a wariness. Or a cussedness.

'What about you?' Plant asked.

'Oh, this and that, you know.'

'Not really.'

'Well, the bookshop. And *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

He took out a business card and handed it to Plant. Plant nodded some more and handed Osbourne a copy of his own card.

'Research assistance, investigative reporting,' Osbourne read. 'So what does that mean when it's translated? Some sort of cut-price private eye?'

'Some sort,' Plant agreed. 'You got a job you want me to quote you a discount price on?'

He watched Osbourne carefully. Osbourne smiled.

'But no case at the moment?'

'Nothing,' Plant said.

He smiled. Osbourne smiled back.

'I imagine that's your standard response,' he said.

Plant smiled some more. The neither confirm nor deny smile.

They talked for a while longer, making conversation, nothing of significance. Then

Shameless shambled over.

'Plant,' he began.

Plant nodded agreement, it was indeed who he was.

'Fullalove tells me you're a private eye. I need a co-author for my crime novel and you'd obviously be perfect. We could base the plot on one of your cases.'

'Seamus finds his shamus,' Osbourne offered.

'Spot on,' said Shameless.

'Not now, Shameless,' Osbourne said, brushing him away.

He wrapped his arm around Plant's shoulders and steered him towards the door, no doubt in the same way that in his days as a publisher

and an agent he had steered rejected and disappointed authors out of his office and onto the desolate pavements of the mean streets. Gently, firmly, inexorably.

'Well, old chap, nice to have met. Drop by the magazine some time. Have a chat. Ever done any crime-reporting?'

'Not as such.'

'Have a think about it.'

'Oh, sure,' Plant said. 'Are you going now?'

'Going? Me? No, not at all, thought you were.'

'Me? No, I wasn't planning on it.'

Though why not? Plant reflected. Take the opportunity. He took it. Didn't even have to sit through the reading.

Chapter Thirty

Back in Sydney Fullalove was listing his books online, classic rebetika and Chet Baker keeping him company. Keying in authors' names and the titles of books was time consuming but increasingly routine. As long as he retained some focus on what he was doing, it allowed his mind to speculate freely about Osbourne. Osbourne the successful, publisher, agent, second-hand bookseller. It somehow didn't quite sound like a successful trajectory. Well, replace second-hand bookseller with online magazine proprietor, did that sound more persuasive? Depended on how many people logged on to *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Not that many, he suspected, but you never knew. He could be wrong, people could be flocking to it. And not just the 50,000 dummy identities he'd probably bought from India or Russia to boost the figures. 150,000 maybe. How would you ever know? Apart from putting in some hard work to find out.

It was the success bit that worried him. Agent Orange and Mac Arber had both said the same thing. Osbourne was successful. Success did not impress Fullalove. It raised his suspicions, sent him off looking for evidence of some dodgy deals or dubious connections.

And what interested him here was the one deal Osbourne had done that wasn't a success. Not according to Agent Orange, anyway. Buying up the rights of those backlist titles. Having invested in such a deal, you'd expect him to be getting at least some of those books reissued, but it hadn't happened. As a former publisher and agent, Osbourne would have known how to get them back into print. Some, if not all. Why buy the rights if he wasn't going to do that? But as far as Fullalove could see, nothing had been reissued at all.

Far from a success, that project. Which didn't sit well with Osbourne's assured sense of well-being and business competence. Competence was what he exuded. Probably what he practised exuding each morning before his breakfast, preparing for a day of full-on, successful exudations.

It didn't take long to find out the list of copyrights that he had acquired. A matter of finding the right helpful person with access to the right place. An item in some old trade magazine of the publishing industry.

The titles had all been published from the 1920s to the 1950s, mainstream fiction, not necessarily bestselling, maybe far from it, but all eminently respectable. What once might have been called household names. But not any more. Most had faded away, not even cited in the lit. crit. studies, certainly not taught in any literature course, insofar as such courses were even taught any more, just forgotten names of a forgotten tradition, predominantly realist writers with chronicles of urban blight and rural deprivation, rather than celebrations of noble dynasties or modernist explorations of enigmatic emptiness. Osbourne hadn't invested in the modern or the contemporary. He had bought into the past, and then left it there.

These were books and authors the publisher had been glad to get rid of. Under new management now. They were the product of a vanished era. So why had Osbourne acquired them? Did he have a sense that there would be a revival in the future, and that he would be poised ready to exploit it? Why else would he have bought the rights? But why wasn't he attempting to begin the revival?

'You know what that bugger Osbourne's doing?' Fullalove yelled above the noise of the inner-city traffic. He was standing in a phone box, shouting as if he needed to project his voice to reach Plant up in the Valley of the Weed. Plant was reclining in a canvas deckchair in the shade, gazing out into space, enjoying the calm of nature, watching a goanna making its way across the grass and into the trees.

'He's running a one-man censorship operation. That's why his bookshop stock makes no sense. All those sort of titles you can't find there. He's suppressed them.'

'Your stock in trade,' Plant said. 'That's good, isn't it? Doesn't impinge

on your market.'

'Bugger the market,' Fullalove said. 'That's not the issue. What he's doing is wiping a whole lot of books out of existence.'

'That's a bit extreme, isn't it? How's he manage that with just one shop?'

'Those rights he bought up I told you about, you remember? He didn't buy them up to reissue them. He bought them up to suppress them. Left-wing, realist stuff. He's got the rights and he's not reissuing them. He's ensuring that no one ever gets the chance to reprint them. He just sits on them and says "No" if anyone asks for permission to reprint. "No." And you can't find second-hand copies of most of them, either. Not in his shop, you can bet. Still, it gives me another swathe of titles I'd better start buying. If I can find them. He's certainly ensuring they stay rare.'

'Well, that's good news for second-hand and rare book dealers like you and Mac,' Plant said. 'Gives you something to look for.'

Fullalove grunted.

Plant brought his afternoon consciousness into focus. 'So you're saying he bought up those rights deliberately to suppress them?'

'Indeed I am. That's what it looks like.'

'Amazing.'

'Yup. Nasty piece of work,' Fullalove said, with deep satisfaction. He was always cheered to find that his worst suspicions about the controls on society were confirmed. He was happy again, assured of how bad things were, and of how aspects of that badness operated.

'Is that all he's up to?' Plant asked. 'Or is that just a part of his business? It's hardly big enough to occupy the whole operation.'

'It's big enough. Censoring out the past.'

'But not all the past. There are still leftist writers in print whose copyrights he hasn't acquired. Surely.' Though when he came to think of it, not many.

'Some. Not that many. Give him time. Depends how you look at it. Is

he basically just suppressing old leftist realists? Or is he just suppressing the white patriarchy, so diversity can have an unhindered run? Which particular politics is he playing? Or is it all the same politics, different branches of the same agenda? Basically, cancel the entire culture. Is that what they're playing at? Is that what they have in mind?'

'They?'

'Osbourne and his backers.'

'I'm surprised he managed to acquire all those rights,' Plant said, passing on the backers for the time being. They wouldn't be going away. 'How did it happen?'

'A disaster. Bad management. Bad decision-making. The original publisher had just been taken over. Not long before. Now the new managerial types come in and go through what they've acquired. They're money men, they're not literary types. They've got the rights on all these titles and none of them is in print and hasn't been for years. Or if they've been in print, they haven't been selling. So why not flog them off, tidy things up and make some money? New broom stuff.'

'And Osbourne happened to hear about it?'

'Or it was all a fix and one of the management was told to flog them off.'

'Told by who?'

'By whom? Have a guess.'

There was usually only one answer when Fullalove said have a guess.

'I still don't think it's a big enough project to occupy him fully,' Plant objected.

'What, cancelling leftist literature? That's not enough to do?'

'He's only got a handful of titles.'

'Two or three handfuls. And he's only just started.'

'Maybe. What else is there? How does *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* fit in?'

'That's what you need to find out.'

'Me?' Plant said, with some alarm.

'You're the investigator.'

'And you're his trusted contributor to *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Get in there and nose around.'

'Like dig into his financial records?'

'Something like that.'

'Hack into his emails.'

'As a start.'

'A start,' Fullalove groaned, merging in with the traffic sirens from police cars and fire engines and ambulances howling through the Sydney streets.

Plant lay back relaxed in his rural peace. 'What else have you got to do?'

'Could be a life's work.'

'Could be,' Plant agreed cheerily.

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove said, with a noticeably unenthusiastic intonation. Gloomily indeed. And yet deep down there was that eager spark of curiosity, that troublesome desire to know. To know the unknown, the unknowable, the truth.

'I guess so,' he said resignedly.

Chapter Thirty-one

'Drop by the magazine some time,' Osbourne had said when he gave Plant his business card. So Plant did, having not much else to do. And having also a curiosity that Fullalove's speculations had helped fuel, about Osbourne and the magazine. So, why not check him out? No, this wasn't an investigation, he wasn't on a case, it was just habit, idle curiosity. But he found himself registering the old familiar feelings that he used to feel when he was on a case, that wary scrutiny of everything, the setting, the walls, the desks, the scepticism embedded in the question-and-answer polite-conversation routine. He didn't want to be on a case, he didn't want to be endlessly suspicious, he'd just dropped in for a chat, thinking about a spot of writing again. But had he? Just dropped in for a chat? Most unlikely. So what was he up to? He didn't want to think about it, he just wanted to get back home and sit on the veranda. Or did he?

Osbourne was all genial, welcoming.

'Take a pew.'

Plant looked round, half expecting a recycled ecclesiastical bench on hand from some deconsecrated church. It would have fitted in with the furnishings, the desk, chairs, bookshelves laden with books. Fullalove had told him about the book-lined walls but not about the atmosphere they created. Not knowing about the movie studio deal, at the time he had interpreted them as overstock from the shop, maybe functioning as insulation. But they were set-dressing, dressing the set of *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* as they dressed the movies they waited to be hired out to. They gave the place something of the feel of an old world library rather than a modern industrial estate unit, far removed from anything Agent Orange and Angela Dark had created for their own little techno-nests. In marked contrast to their workplaces, the packed shelves around the walls exuded something of the gentler, dustier feel of the bookshop, where the hardbacks had softened and the paperbacks shed gentle fragments into the fibrous air.

Plant sat himself down on a hard, upright chair. Osbourne, much like Agent Orange or Angela Dark, indeed pretty well exactly like them, stayed behind his desk, in control, protected from the world. One of those pompous early twentieth-century partners' desks, solid, imposing, even threatening. A small stuffed white woolly toy lamb sat beside the computer. There was no sign of any staff around.

'So, bookshop, magazine, movie sets, what's next?' Plant asked. 'A literary festival, maybe? Or a literary prize?'

'Spare me,' Osbourne said. 'Not sure either of those things has much to do with literature. If anything at all. Fashion, show, ephemera ...'

'And you prefer ...?'

'I started off in publishing. When publishers were comparatively small operations. Family businesses, a lot of them. Not even families. Escape from the families. One man operations. All about books and reading. The cottage industry of the establishment. But that's all changed. It's a different world now. Global entertainment. Product placement. Massive marketing operations. In the end I found I was missing the world of books and magazines that I used to know. The sort of quality they produced.

'And then I thought to myself, why sit around lamenting? Why not stop moaning and get all those books back into circulation with a second-hand bookshop? And why not start a magazine that I'd enjoy reading. So I did.'

'I'm impressed,' Plant said. And he was.

Osbourne smiled graciously from behind his desk.

'So you came up here? Why's that?'

'Here?' Osbourne asked, 'Here?' He raised his arms up wide, spreading them out to embrace the Northern Rivers. 'You ask why here? Where else would you rather be?'

'True enough,' Plant agreed.

'You better believe it,' Osbourne assured him. 'Where do you live? Up here, don't you?'

Plant admitted that he did.

'There you are then.'

Plant made more noises of agreement.

'No, I'd had enough of England. The weather, the climate. Too stuffy. In every sense. You can get things done here. Not that most of the lazy buggers ever do. But if you want to, you can. I wanted to and so back I came.'

'And did things.'

Osbourne smiled in acknowledgement.

'So,' he said, preliminaries dispensed with, 'what can I do for you?'

'For me?'

Nothing much, he stopped himself from saying.

'You looking for work?'

'Not really. Can't say that I am.'

'Criminals all taking it easy?'

'Seems so.'

'Ever done any crime reporting?'

'Not really.'

'Not really? Or not at all?'

'Well, I've done investigations. And I've done some freelancing for the papers. But not crime reporting as such.'

'Ever think of giving it a go?'

Plant stopped himself from saying 'not really' again. If you were going to say that, you might as well say 'no, not at all.'

'I'll have a think about it,' he said.

'You do that.'

'You got many people working for you?' Plant asked, back on autopilot, auto-questioning away.

'They come and go,' he said. 'They're all freelance. Regulars, but freelance.'

'So no overheads.'

'There are always overheads.'

Of course. Times are always tough for farmers and publishers.

'What about office staff?'

'Same deal.'

'But they haven't freelanced in today.'

'They work from home,' Osbourne said. 'They come in if and when it's necessary.'

'Do you still have those late-night shifts like they had in the old newspaper business?'

'No, not like that at all. But if it suits them to come in at night sometimes, sure, whenever.'

'What sort of people?'

'Literate. Tech-savvy. Lots of them up here. Overqualified. Underemployed. Eager to get some work.'

'Like Lucy?'

'Lucy? Oh, you mean up at the bookshop. I don't know how tech savvy she is, but she knows her books. Can't fault her on that.'

'How did you find her?'

'She found me. Heard about the shop and came in one day and offered herself. As it were.'

'You already knew her?'

'Knew her from years back. Her husband used to be my tutor.'

'Her tutor too.'

'Well, yes.'

'Did you know him?'

'Well, he tutored me.'

'But other than that?'

'No, not especially. Tragic end.'

'You didn't work with him?'

'At university? No, not my scene.'

'Anywhere else?'

'Anywhere else what? Publishing, agenting, they were my scene.'

'And you didn't work with him in those?'

'No, he was never a publisher.'

'Nor an agent?'

'No.'

'Not of any sort?'

'Oh well, can't say I know about that. Pretty much part of the job description with those academic chaps, from what you hear. Can't say, myself.'

He stood up behind his desk.

'Would've suggested nipping out for a coffee, but I've really got to get things done here.'

'That's all right,' Plant said.

'Where's your mate Fullalove today?'

'He went back to Sydney.'

'Keeping busy, is he?'

'Who knows?'

'Tell him I'm still waiting for some copy from him.'

'I will.'

'And you, too. A bit of true crime, maybe.'

'I'll think about it.'

'You do that,' Osbourne said, coming out from behind the desk, his arm gently round Plant's shoulder, steering him to the door and out into the industrial estate, shimmering there in the morning sun.

Was Osbourne a serious businessman, an investor, a dilettante hobbyist, a remittance man, a crook, a front man? Could be any or all of them. And more. Plant couldn't tell. Though just having listed the possibilities was suggestive enough.

A smooth operator, without a doubt. Civilized, urbane, genial, all those things. Plant found he rather liked him. Which gave him food for thought. Further food for thought.

Chapter Thirty-two

Fullalove toyed with various ideas for a piece for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* as he drove back up north. One close to his heart, for he had a heart, rough exterior notwithstanding, was for legalizing marijuana. But for all its closeness, his heart was not totally in it, since it still involved allowing government control and an excise duty. Better it was all legal, all free, all untaxed. But the excise duty was part of his argument's persuasion. The way to get the proposal accepted. Revenue to pay off the state's debts, pay off the nation's debts. Legalize and then collect excise revenue as with alcohol. It was a compromise, but surely better than the current situation.

The one issue he had with it was attaching his name. Why draw attention to yourself as a marijuana advocate if you were a regular user? Whichever way you looked at it, declaring your dependency online was hardly a wise move.

The other issue was something else again. Indeed, it was now becoming the fundamental issue in Fullalove's head, having moved from his heart. Would Osbourne run a piece advocating drug use? Well, that was what he was trying to find out, wasn't he? Legalization itself was running a second place in Fullalove's strategy; his prime concern was finding out what those issues were that Osbourne would and wouldn't run, and what that might suggest.

The solution came to him about half way up the Pacific Motorway. Half way, that is, to his destination. Somewhere around Kempsey. It made the usually tiring second half of the drive a joy to experience as he rehearsed the article, paragraph by paragraph, and formulated his strategy.

Shameless! He would feed it to Shameless.

He called him as he drove up the coast.

Shameless answered after a couple of rings as he always did, always waiting for the call, a call, any call. They got down to business straight

away. The thing about Shameless was that he didn't waste time on the merely polite and personal. Nor did Fullalove.

'You know what would save the country from bankruptcy?' Fullalove asked.

'Tell me.'

'Legalizing marijuana. Look what happened in the United States. Massive revenue returns from excise tax.'

'Go on.'

'So why don't we do it here?' Fullalove asked.

'I guess nobody's thought to suggest it. You got any thoughts on it?'

'That was my thought. But I guess I could think a bit further.'

'Send me a couple of pars on it,' Shameless said, 'and I'll see what I can do.'

Fullalove sent him a whole article the next morning. He had a smoke, a few swigs of Mount Warning water, and sat down and dashed it off. Not too worried about detailed elegancies.

'That was quick,' Plant said.

'Yeah, well, they're not going to run it so no need to get too fussed.'

'How do you know that?'

'Call it intuition.'

'So why write it?'

'To show that Osbourne won't run it.'

'And why do you want to show that?'

'To find out what the bugger's up to,' Fullalove said. 'What are the limits of his squeaky-clean liberalism? And what he's really concerned about, if anything.'

'And he's not concerned about legalizing marijuana?'

'Just one of the significant absences in his agenda,' Fullalove said.

'Significant absences?'

'He's a whole construct of them.'

'Go on.'

'The absence of any reissues of all those backlist titles he acquired.

No dope books in his shop. No hard-line political books.'

'So what you don't see with Osbourne is what you get?'

'Looks like it.'

'You can't really say looks, though, when there's nothing to look at.'

'Seems, then. Seems that way.'

'I can agree with that,' Plant agreed.

It was better than coming up with the old 'I know not seems' line. Certainly more positive.

Chapter Thirty-three

The next issue of *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* appeared. Shameless's piece was not in it. Well, Fullalove's piece under Seamus's by-line. Not there.

Fullalove dropped by the office. Osbourne was there alone.

'When are we going to get something from you?' he asked.

'Working on it,' Fullalove said. 'Getting there.'

'Good. Looking forward to it,' Osbourne said.

'What happened to Seamus's legalization piece? You didn't like it?' Fullalove asked. No point shilly-shallying around, just get to the point.

'Oh, he told you about that, did he?'

'Yes, he sent me a copy to have a look at.'

'Really? That's not like Shameless.'

'I thought it argued the case pretty well.'

'Yes, pity about that. Nothing wrong with it at all. It's just that up here it isn't the same as other places. Like down in Sydney. For some reason they keep on policing it up here, sniffer dogs on the streets, sniffer dogs at festivals, sniffer dogs at roadside random breath tests. The last thing you'd want to do up here is draw attention to yourself. Don't want the cops thinking we're advocating drugs, do that and we'd have them on our backs every day. And night. I don't want to spend the next six or nine months getting speeding tickets and parking tickets and worn windscreen wiper blades notices because I've alienated the local police force.'

'Why would the police do that?'

'Well, they'd assume that since we were advocating legalization, then we were probably using the stuff.'

'"We" being?'

'Well, me, office staff, contributors. It could impact on a lot of people's lives.'

'And they'd come round with sniffer dogs?'

'It's not about sniffer dogs. That was just an illustration. It's about the

mindset. I could be wrong. I hope I am. But it's not worth the trouble.'

'Possible trouble,' Fullalove said.

'Yes. Possible trouble.'

'Would that really happen?'

'It can. And does.'

'Here?'

'I don't know about here. I don't propose to find out, either. But that's why we had to pass on that piece.'

'Sure,' said Fullalove.

'I paid Seamus a kill fee,' Osbourne said. 'Reimburse him for his time.'

What about my time? Fullalove asked, silently.

'Useful fellow. Lost his column in Sydney, but still has useful connections.'

'Really?'

'In the newspaper world, political world, you know, comes up with some interesting stuff.'

'Where does he get it?' Fullalove asked, all innocence.

'Who knows? The imagination? Research? Bird tables?'

'Bird tables?'

'Oh, you know, there's always someone or other feeding the birds with a few crumbs. Official unofficial leaks. He knows where to scavenge and scrounge. Useful chap to have around.'

'Useful? Who for?'

'For everyone.'

'And sound?'

'Not the sort of word you hear that often these days,' Osbourne said, not answering the question.

Shameless seemed unfazed. Osbourne may have rejected the piece. But it turned up the following week in *The Spectator*. Under Seamus's by-line.

'Well, you didn't want to be identified with it,' Plant said.

'I know, but ... I mean, really,' Fullalove huffed and puffed.

'Now you know how poor Colette must have felt when Willie published her novels under his name.'

Fullalove merely muttered.

'Or all those toilers turning out copy for Alexandre Dumas.'

'Tough,' Fullalove said, not especially sympathetically.

'You could always write a piece for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* about it. Creative Recycling. Or Appropriation, Authorship and Authenticity ... How about that?'

Fullalove simply groaned.

'Maybe I'll write it myself,' Plant said.

'Why not?' Fullalove said. 'Just make sure you send it to Shameless. He'll get it published somewhere.'

'Why are you so upset? You didn't want it published. You wanted to keep your name off it and get Shameless to send it in under his by-line, and what you wanted then was for it not to get published. To prove some obsession you've got about stuff being censored. And now it's proved. So what are you huffing and puffing about? It's all worked out. You should be happy.'

'I am happy. Up to a point. More or less. It's just annoying seeing Shameless go and get it published.'

'But you didn't want your name on it.'

'Yeah. But I didn't want Shameless's on it if it was going to get into print.'

'You can't have everything,' Plant said.

'I don't see why not.'

'Nor do I,' Plant agreed, 'but that's how things seem to be.'

'Well, they need to be changed.'

'Sure,' Plant agreed.

Chapter Thirty-four

Fullalove insisted on going into Byron Bay for a morning coffee.

'Let's go somewhere we can talk freely.'

'We can talk freely here.'

'Maybe. Dunno. I haven't got the gear with me to check it out.'

'Check it out for what?' Plant asked wearily. But he knew.

'For bugs, of course.'

'Of course.'

'Apart from which, I dunno how you put up with this tea you drink all the time. I need a decent coffee. Just because you think going into Byron's beneath you, being a local resident and lamenting about the way it's become overrun by backpacking Eurotrash, you don't have to avoid it like it's got the plague.'

'It does have the plague. Did have. So probably still does.'

'So does everywhere. Just wear a mask.'

'I don't share your delight in wearing a mask. No one wears them any more.'

'More fools them. The plague's here to stay. Like a lot of even nastier things.'

Cappuccino in hand and mask beneath his chin and sunglasses perched on his nose, Fullalove sat with his back to the ocean and held forth.

'Best not to talk about this in your house. You never know.'

Plant nodded resignedly. Bad water, bad tea, and now bad bugs.

'I've been looking into Shameless.'

'Oh yes, how did you manage that? Got a telescope focussed on his habitat?'

'Just reading the stuff he writes for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'And?'

'And he writes on anything.'

'The way to survive as a columnist,' Plant said.

'More like a bower bird, snapping up anything.'

'A snapper-up of unconsidered trifles.'

'But are they unconsidered? Or is it all directed? Here you are, puss puss, have a bit of this, just down there, come on and peck it up.'

'Is he a bird or is he a cat? They're sort of incompatible.'

'He's whatever suits him. And whatever he's given.'

'That's how you reckon he works?'

'I think he's being fed.'

'Someone's sending him stuff?'

'More than one, I reckon.'

'Like what?'

'Well, look at what he writes.'

'Must I?'

'I've been through *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Originally he was a climate-change denier. Then suddenly he's shifted and he's become a global-warming doomsayer. And then he's into nuclear energy as the salvation.'

'So why the shift?'

'Change of line from party headquarters, maybe? The nuclear lobby?'

'You reckon?'

'Or instructions from some military-industrial complex lobby group.'

'Like some secret service outfit?'

'You said it.'

'I'm familiar with your thought patterns. It's clearly what you were implying.'

'Is that so?'

'What's with this coyness, Fullalove?'

Fullalove grinned. He seemed not to mind being called coy, maybe rather liked it. He'd been called many worse things.

'It's hard to tell with blokes like him. They seem to blunder around in a random sort of way. Turning out a thousand words a pop on any old

piece of fluff. And then they lob in some heavy political piece. Or wander down memory lane with some ancient history about the Cold War or Mao's Cultural Revolution, all too well-informed. When would he have researched any of that? He's not a historian or a political scientist. No, it's been fed to him.'

'Why?'

'To keep up the level of fear. Dig up China as the big threat to world peace. Along with Russia. Justify the new arms race. Beef up the military budget. Get everyone looking under the bed again for spies.'

Plant sipped at his half-decent cup of tea. He definitely preferred his own. He gazed out across the breaking surf and the ocean stretching away to the distant horizon. Gulls, terns, cormorants, kites, eagles, all flying and diving, porpoises, whales, sharks, schools of fish all swimming and leaping. And, further down deep beneath the surface, lurking Chinese submarines, if the media were to be believed. Let alone French and Japanese and American and British ones. And warships too, up there on the surface, not even lurking.

'Does it make any sense?'

'Oh yes, it makes sense. A sort of sense. Always quite well argued.'

'So he can make an argument.'

'If he makes it.'

'What do you mean?'

'Maybe he's not just being fed the ideas, maybe he's being fed the actual copy. I've been doing a close reading of his columns and they vary quite a bit. Half the time I reckon someone else has written them for him. Like the poet Prickett's piece. And mine on legalization. There are stylistic differences.'

'Well, you can't keep on writing the same old thing, not even Shameless.'

'No, it's the style that varies. Like they've been written by different people. Like when he ran poor old Prickett's piece on the death of the novel. It's the way he does things. Puts his name to stuff that comes in.'

'Does he write any of it himself?'

'Hard to say. Some of it, presumably. But there again, who knows?'

They sat in silence while Plant brooded on the issues and Fullalove savoured his coffee.

'So does Osbourne know what Shameless is up to?'

'I reckon he would. He'd have to. And it obviously suits him. Suits *Mad, Bad and Dangerous.* Shameless is a useful conduit.'

'A conduit?'

'For official leaks.'

'Aren't all leaks unofficial?'

'No, some are official. And whether they're official or unofficial, they need a conduit to get them into print. And Shameless is clearly it. Or one of them.'

'Really?'

'That's why Osbourne runs him. Otherwise he wouldn't put up with him. No one would. He's part of the system. Has to be. Both of them.'

'What system? Or need I ask?'

'The system of thought control. The soft propaganda machine.'

'So who's running that?'

'Who do you think?'

Plant didn't need to think. Government, security services, political parties, industrial lobbyists, military.

'You reckon?'

'Someone has to do it.'

'I guess so.'

'It's not a matter of guessing. It's the way it is.'

'I guess so,' Plant said yet once more. It probably was. Very likely. Almost certainly. Ah, well.

'So who's actually writing the stuff? Who's feeding it to Shameless? Has to be people in the know. You got any ideas?'

Fullalove just shook his head.

'Might be interesting to find out.'

'Are you mad?' Fullalove asked. 'You had a stroke or something? Rapid onset dementia?'

'Me?' Plant asked.

'Why would I nose around in that can of worms? Can of death-adders. Some things are best not to know. Safest, anyway.'

'Sure,' Plant agreed. 'But you're not going to be able to help yourself, are you? You're going to nose around till you come up with somebody or something.'

Fullalove sniffed.

'Never know,' he said. 'See what turns up.'

'With a little bit of help from you.'

'Well, it's not something I'd be asking around for help on.'

'Not even from Shameless.'

'Especially not from Shameless.'

'Nor even from Osbourne.'

'For once,' Fullalove said, 'you're absolutely right.'

'But how does that all fit into *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*? Isn't *Mad, Bad* all progressive and feminist and black lives matter and asylum seekers and climate change and all that?'

'Of course,' Fullalove said. 'And what it isn't is anything from the real left, no old socialist demands for a welfare state and free tertiary education and public ownership of utilities, no critique of creeping privatization. The progressive stuff is all cosmetic. Ruling-class liberals. And that's where the stuff that's fed to Shameless comes in. That's the real agenda. He's the hairy heel of the politically-correct liberals, the reactionary positions they hold onto beneath their veneer of diversity and democracy and dissidence. All a lie.'

'And Osbourne's complicit?'

'He has to be.'

'Does he?'

'He's not stupid.'

'Just corrupt,' Plant ventured.

'Just part of the system. Institutional practice.'

'And he wants you to write for him.'

'Yes.'

'Have you wondered why? Just for a moment?'

' 'Cause I've written for him before.'

'Hadn't you ever thought he might think you're as dodgy as you think he is?'

'And?'

'And so he wants to keep you close to him to see what you're up to.'

'You've said that before. And I'm not up to anything.'

'You're up to finding out what dodgy stuff he's up to.'

'Well, I guess so.'

'And you really think he hasn't noticed? Someone as dodgy as you say he is. Why else would he have invited you to write for him?'

'I gotta get something to eat,' Fullalove said, getting up to look for a croissant.

Chapter Thirty-five

To Plant's relaxed observation, Fullalove's new media career hardly seemed to be flourishing. The one topic close to his heart, legalizing marijuana, had been spiked. And not even submitted under his own name. It didn't seem a promising beginning. They sat on Plant's veranda as evening fell, light faded, the frogs croaked, and the mosquitoes emerged, out for blood.

'We know Osbourne's probably bogus,' Fullalove said. 'In fact no "probably" about it. Almost certainly.'

'Maybe.'

'No "maybe" about it either. But how often do you get a chance to work up close with these creatures?'

Plant was unsure. Fullalove's world-view generally assumed all media figures were bogus, complicit and untrustworthy.

'Like living on the Isle of Jura with Orwell. It's the best way to find out about these bastards. The only way.'

'Find out what, specifically?'

'Ultimately, who's running them. Who's paying them. Who's protecting them.'

'But don't you already know, with your view of the world?'

Fullalove grinned, a grin of happy satisfaction.

'Maybe I want to know more.'

'Like Oliver Twist?'

Fullalove shrugged.

'If he's as connected and protected as well as you imply, you'd better be careful.'

'Thank you for your concern,' Fullalove said. 'How could I not have thought of that?'

'Quite easily, you smug bastard.'

'True,' Fullalove said. 'How easily I could've. Forgotten, that is. I must remember to be careful.'

'On the other hand, why not?' Plant suggested.

'Why not what?'

'Why not just sail on regardless?'

'Why not?' Fullalove agreed. 'For the time being.'

'All this cancelling leftist culture,' Plant began.

'Yes?'

'You're not saying that's why he's running that bookshop. I mean, one little shop up the Gold Coast isn't going to purge the nation's entire literary canon, is it?'

'He may not be the only one doing it. Almost certainly he isn't. It's happening all over the country. All over the old Western world. He and a network of people like him could have some deal with university libraries. They're all purging their shelves of books and going digital. In theory. But basically they're just clearing the shelves. Anything that hasn't been borrowed in the last five years, out they throw it. And who knows what else.'

'Out to where?'

'To off-campus deposit libraries, they claim. Landfill, believe it or not. Tables of free books they've thrown out, outside the library doors. They could have a deal going with Osbourne, he takes the books they throw out, sells some and pulps the rest. That way the universities aren't directly involved in the pulping.'

'You have any evidence for this?'

'For what the libraries have been doing, yes. Massive disgrace. Fully-documented. Osbourne's part in it, just a hunch, still to check it out.'

'So is that really what it's all about? Cancelling books.'

'Cancelling Western culture.' Fullalove said. 'Government policy. Look what they've been doing. They introduced a tax on books with the goods and services tax, against United Nations policy; they abolished the book bounty subsidy for printing in Australia; they abolished the concessional reduced postage rate on printed matter so that it's really

expensive to send books through the mail now; and they abolished retail price maintenance. Which all had a devastating negative effect on book sales.'

'And you're saying what? Osbourne buys up books the university libraries are throwing out and then what?'

'Puts some in his shop and pulps the rest.'

'So he pulps the ones he figures he can't sell, presumably.'

'He pulps the ones with the wrong sort of politics, wrong sort of values, wrong sort of identity. The classics that need to be eliminated in the name of diversity. The whole of Western culture. And since the libraries have thrown them out, they can't be borrowed again so they are effectively cancelled.'

'They might have replaced them with digital texts.'

'They might. They might not. Has anyone checked to see? Anyway, the point about digital texts is that digital texts can be easily changed. They can rewrite history in the way they couldn't do with printed books.'

'Have you checked all this out? I didn't notice any library marks on the books in the shop.'

'I'll take it on trust,' Fullalove said, 'that one way or another a whole lot of books are being purged and pulped and cancelled.'

'Evidence or lack of it notwithstanding.'

'For the time being.'

'And you really believe this? That that's what he's up to?'

'In part. But it can be about more than one thing at a time,' Fullalove said.

'Go on.'

'Second-hand bookshops are open to a lot of scams.'

'Go on,' Plant said again.

'Who ever knows what the books cost in the first place? Or in the second place, that is, when the shop acquires them. You just inflate that figure for tax purposes, so you don't seem to be making a profit. Or alternatively you can set it up for money-laundering by inventing

sales of non-existent books and claiming that's where all your vast profit comes from. And it's very much a cash business. Wide open to fiddling.'

'You speak as one who's looked into it.'

Fullalove nodded modestly.

'So what's the money he's laundering? Assuming that he is.'

'That's what we have to find out.'

'We?' said Plant. 'Maybe just leave me out of it.'

Chapter Thirty-six

'So let's start with the shop,' Fullalove announced. 'There's clearly something not right about it and I intend to find out what it is. Like why is the stock not listed online? Well, clearly to avoid any records that might indicate anything about their finances. Like how many books got sold and at what return. If they're money-laundering they're going to be faking their turnover so they wouldn't want any stock list or prices online. Or written down anywhere else, either. And like no CCTV, so there's no way of knowing if anyone ever goes in there and buys anything at all.'

'Your stock wasn't listed online either.'

'Exac'ly. But I had a good reason. My stock's stuff that you wouldn't want to attract attention to by listing it online. But Osbourne's stock, it's totally innocuous. Except its very innocuousness shows it isn't.'

'Isn't what?'

'Innocuous. Why is there no dope stuff, why is there no political stuff?'

'Who knows?' Plant said, wearily.

'I know. I'm telling you.'

Fullalove in command. Plant pulled a parodic poker face.

'Yessir,' he said, saluting.

'Because he doesn't want the sort of people who'd buy those sorts of books coming into the shop. And why not?'

Plant knew not to offer a suggestion, even if he had one, which he hadn't.

'I'll tell you why not. Because he doesn't want to attract attention. He doesn't want the cops and suchlike coming round. And those sort of people who'd buy those sorts of books are liable to be under surveillance from the police and the drug squad and anti-terrorist spooks. People like that draw the cops in after them. And he doesn't want the cops taking any notice at all of what he's up to. Doesn't want them around.'

'Not even bringing their dogs in to buy a copy of *White Fang*?'

'They wouldn't find it. If you'd looked around carefully instead of perving on your lady friend, you'd have seen there were no Jack London titles. No full-on Marxists in his stock at all.'

'Interesting.'

'So apart from convenient cancelling and censorship opportunities, which I'll come to later, he wants the place totally bland so that no one the cops might be interested in is ever going to turn up and draw them in.'

'OK,' Plant conceded. 'Point made. So why doesn't he want the cops coming in?'

'Because obviously he's up to something. And it has to be money-laundering. Almost certainly. Somewhere along the line he's making a fortune and needs to launder the profits.'

'What sort of money-laundering?'

'Just money-laundering. Washing it clean and removing any trace of its source. Or provenance, as the antique dealers put it. What other sort is there?'

'I mean what from?'

'Drugs. Guns. Prostitution. Blackmail. Theft. Forgery. Smuggling. Take your pick.'

'But drugs is what first comes to mind? To your mind, anyway.'

'Naturally,' Fullalove agreed.

'Naturally. So why are you so determined to pursue him? What's wrong with laundering money from drugs? Sure, it would be better if they were free or legalized or whatever. But he's providing a service to the community in your view, surely.'

'Maybe,' Fullalove said. 'But I think there's more to it than that. There's just something about him.'

'What sort of something?'

'Not sure yet. But something deeply dodgy.'

'Not just dope.'

'No.'

'Something deep and dodgy.'

'Exac'ly.'

Spare us, Plant muttered. To himself. But there again, who knew? Fullalove might be onto something.

'The issue is this,' Fullalove said. 'We're up here, in the Valley of the Weed. He lives on a property and he's laundering money. Let's postulate that unlike you he is making productive use of his land.'

'Go on.'

'So how would he be doing that? He's growing something that generates a lot of cash and he needs to launder the profits. Let's have an informed guess on what that something might be. How about macadamia nuts, bananas, blueberries, avocados, what would you think? Up here in the Valley of the Weed? Let's postulate that he's growing marijuana.'

Plant sighed, the calm and peace of the afternoon withdrawing as Fullalove held forth.

'Now, the question is, how can you grow a commercial quantity of marijuana that generates so much money that you need to launder the profits, without it being picked up by satellite surveillance? Or by all those helicopters that keep buzzing around?'

'There's no evidence that he's growing dope.'

'Everything points to it.'

'So?' Plant said, sceptically.

'So how's he concealing it?'

'Maybe he plants it amongst the trees,' Plant suggested.

'You could do that for a handful of plants, maybe. But a whole commercial crop, it'd be too hard to manage.'

'Maybe he has canvas coverings.'

'So how's the crop going to ripen?'

'Maybe those covered greenhouses they grow berries in.'

'But they'd have to be transparent, wouldn't they? So the crop would

still be spotted.'

'Maybe it's all hydroponic and he's built a couple of sheds.'

'Then his power bills would be high. They're monitoring that sort of thing.'

'So they're solar-panelled.'

'What about water?'

'You're saying that's monitored too?'

'Of course.'

'Tank water, how about that?' Plant offered, still sore at Fullalove's rejection of his own tank water.

'Or he's drilled into the aquifer.'

'So he's not a true believer, growing it organically, like in soil and fresh air. This is that disgusting hydroponic shit and who knows what additives they put in the water.'

'Sounds about right.' Fullalove agreed. 'Just because he's got an electric car doesn't mean he cares about organic dope. He's not that green.'

'Nothing about him sounds remotely green.'

'Except the electric car.'

'That's just window-dressing,' Plant said. 'Like *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Lots of climate-change carry on. But no one saying if we went vegetarian and prohibited meat production we would do wonders in terms of methane emissions. Which is odd when you think about it since up here we're knee deep in animal rights activists. But he's not letting any of them get a word into the magazine.'

'So there you are.'

'Possibly.'

'Sure. Forget the modish veneer. What it's really all about is making money. No other agenda than that. The same old agenda he's always operated on. Money, money, money. He's not going to offend the farming lobby or the supermarket lobby, is he, by running rabid vegan articles?'

'And that's what it's all about in the end?'

'Probably not,' Fullalove said. Inevitably. 'No, there's probably more to it than that.'

'I'm still stuck on the concealment issue. They've got really sophisticated satellite surveillance, checking out that agricultural subsidies aren't being rorted. That's how they pick up the dope plantations, because they exude some characteristic vibe or colour or heat or something.'

'Or so they say,' Plant offered. 'That's the story they tell us but it could be disinformation. Just to scare people off from growing the stuff.'

'Maybe. But assuming it's true, then how does a decent crop not get registered?'

'No idea.'

'Because it doesn't.'

'Doesn't get registered?'

'No, doesn't not get registered. Of course it gets picked up.'

'Go on.'

'So he's given the green light.'

'What green light?'

'To go ahead and grow it.'

'Why would he have been given the green light? Who would've given it to him?'

'It's an entrapment operation.'

'What?'

'It's been set up as an entrapment plantation.'

'Sounds like a fairy tale. The enchanted entrapment. The plantation of delights.'

'It's not a fairy tale. It's standard practice. They've been doing it for years. You set up a supply source, that way you find out who the dealers are when they come and buy it off you. You can keep it going for years, and keep on finding out who the new dealers are when the old ones have been identified and put out of business. And once it's got going you can siphon off more and more of the cash flow. Or, you know,

the operation could've been closed down, officially, but Osbourne just keeps it going. A retirement project, a private superannuation fund. Pretending he's running an entrapment operation but no-one gets into the trap, they just sell the dope anyway, like they always meant to, and keep all the profits. It's a classic deception strategy, looks like a secret service operation to any secret service operatives nosing around, so they leave it alone, assuming it's some off the books operation by one of their other branches. Alternatively, it could be part of a larger plan, and the bookshop and *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* have a role in it, cancelling books and propagandizing the bullshit liberal agenda of the ruling class.'

'Who'd want to do that?'

'Have a guess.'

'I've no idea.'

'Yes you do. You just don't want to see it. I think this is almost certainly a protected operation. This isn't some independent entrepreneur putting his superannuation into a bookshop and dope farm instead of into a newsagency or a bakery. The *Mad, Bad* agenda isn't what you'd expect from a small time operation. It's too much *Voice of America*.'

'Oh no,' Plant groaned.

'Well, close enough. Two things. Why's he not been picked up by satellite, and why's he running the *Mad, Bad* agenda? They suggest an official agency op.'

'You've got absolutely no evidence for any of this,' Plant said, groaned, even lamented. 'This is utter craziness. You don't even know he's growing dope.'

'He's doing something to require money-laundering, what's more obvious or likely up here than dope?'

'You don't even know that he's money-laundering.'

'No. True. The best you can do is hypothesize. Get a good story out of it. You're never going to know the truth, most likely. That's the whole point of secret operations. You can't get in there like an investigative team with forensics. All you can do is speculate. Remotely. And intelligently.'

'So it's all speculation. There's no reason to imagine it's an intelligence operation.'

'Why not?'

'Because it could just be dope growing.'

'Why can't it be both?'

'I guess it could,' Plant agreed, wearily.

'On past performance almost certainly,' Fullalove said.

'But not necessarily.'

'Maybe not.'

'But murky waters. Best left alone, as you said.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Fullalove said. 'After all, why look a gift horse in the mouth?'

'For safety and a long and happy life,' Plant suggested.

'You're chicken.'

'You bet.'

'I'm disappointed in you.'

'Many people have been,' Plant said. 'But I'm still around. Which tends to disappoint them even more.'

'No,' Fullalove said. 'I may be disappointed but I'm glad you're still around.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Might need your research assistance and investigative reporting on this one.' he said. Amiably.

Yet to Plant's ears, menacingly. He'd had enough.

'I've gotta go,' he announced, getting up.

'Go where?'

'Have a lie down before dinner. I need a rest.'

'You need more exercise,' Fullalove said.

'You can talk.'

'Indeed I can. And am doing so. You're unfit. Those morning walks

of yours, they're a joke. You need to run. Just ambling along the beach is useless. Have a look at those crime shows you watch too much of all the time. The British ones, not the Yanks. The Yanks are still stuck in car chases. But the Brits, they make all their police and private eyes run, all of them always running after villains. Down narrow alleyways, up rugged hills, along woodland tracks. Every poor old clapped-out ageing actor playing a poor old clapped-out cop or private eye is always running. The directors do it to torment them. Force them to chase imaginary villains. It keeps them fit. Don't want them dying off in the middle of a production. You need to take a leaf out of their book and follow their example. Get healthy. Run, rabbit, run.'

Plant could've pointed out he was a plant, not a rabbit. And that the private eyes and police on television followed scripts, not books. Television was not books. When you turned to the great originals, in print on paper, who ever read of Sherlock Holmes or Father Brown or Miss Marple running? But words failed him. Not for the first time. Run! An appalling idea. And coming from Fullalove, grotesque. Unacceptable. And conveniently so. No need to take Fullalove's advice on the virtues of physical exercise any more than on the dangers of tank water.

Chapter Thirty-seven

A beautiful morning, a gentle sun, no wind, no rain, and Fullalove away at the old cronies' lunch. Plant relaxed on his veranda with no obligations. No major obligations. The copies of Mandy's books that Lucy had made him buy he put beside him. He might have missed the reading – indeed he had – but he'd bought the books. Having spent good money on them, and not at second-hand prices, he felt some sort of pressure to read them. Waste not want not. Dip into them at least. It was not too dreadful a chore. Indeed, it might prove to be enjoyable. Delightful. Browsing there in a garden of delights. Without a running commentary from Fullalove.

He kicked off with *Moll Gallipoli*. Not bad at all. The full-on sexuality was a bit challenging first thing in the morning. But that was what fiction was expected to provide when she started out all those years ago. From what he could remember. Maybe he should have been reading her most recent offering. Maybe not. He carried on, anyway. Not exactly aroused. Diverted, maybe.

The sound of a vehicle driving up his track interrupted him. Not Fullalove's ute, he knew the sound of that. He put down *Moll Gallipoli* and waited.

A classic old Land Rover, olive green, not quite camouflage, lumbered up into view. He didn't like the look of it. Not associations he welcomed. The military associations were bad enough, Britain's answer to the Jeep, but even more disturbing was the way it was constantly featured as the police vehicle of choice in all those British crime shows that Fullalove accused him of watching too much of on television, *Vera, Rosemary and Thyme*, *The Coroner*, *Death in Paradise*, *Shetland*.

It came to a halt and Mandy stepped out.

Plant stood up and she waved. He walked down to intercept her.

'How'd you find me?' he asked. 'Have you been tracking me down?' Not the most welcoming of greetings, but the questions that first came

to mind.

'No problem,' she assured him. 'Lucy told me where you live.'

'Lucy? She told me you told her.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Ah well,' she said.

'Wow,' she said as she reached the veranda. 'You've been reading my books.'

He couldn't deny it.

'A fan!' she said. 'Are you? How did you like them?'

'Well ...' he tried to begin.

'I know, I know, the sex-worker stuff is a bit full on,' she said, picking up *Moll Gallipoli* and flicking through the pages.

'Well ...'

'Freaks some people out. Men especially.'

'Yes, well ...'

'Don't worry,' she said. 'I'm through with all that now.'

'All that ...?'

'Men,' she said.

'Ah, men.'

'Amen indeed,' she said. 'Same with Lucy.'

'What, you're through with her?'

'Ha, ha, very droll. No. Far from it. Quite the reverse, in fact.'

'Oh no,' Plant heard himself say, unguardedly. 'Don't tell me you two are an item.'

'We two are an item,' she told him, smiling, happy, delighted at his discomfort. 'What, you still got the hots for her?' she asked. 'Ah well, pity about that. From your point of view, that is.'

He shook his head. 'No, no,' he said. But why was he shaken at the news? Shocked? Shaken? Saddened? Or just plain put out, envious?

She smiled, almost affectionately. 'You left it too late,' she said.

He nodded reflectively.

'You got a bad neck or something?' she asked. 'I can teach you some exercises.'

'No, I'm fine,' he said.

'If you say so.'

'I say so.'

'You don't look it.'

'So what brings you here?' he tried. Get back to being the one asking the questions. Try to.

'You're freaking Lucy out, you know.'

'Me?'

'She thinks you're doing your private eye bit on her. Checking up on her.'

'Why would I be doing that?'

'She's got no idea. But she thinks you must suspect her of something. Since you're supposed to be some sort of private investigator. Unless it's just sex.'

'What would I suspect her of?'

'I don't know till you tell me.'

'There's nothing to tell you.'

'Fine. That's good. Not suspicious. And not about sex.'

'No.'

'So how about a coffee?' she said.

'Tea or Mount Warning mineral water.'

'Wollumbin.'

'What?'

'Wollumbin. The traditional name of the Bundjalung people for Mount Warning.'

'Ah. I stand corrected.'

'You do.'

'I must tell Fullalove. Which do you want then?'

'Tea for two,' she said.

'Two for tea,' he confirmed, heading indoors to the kitchen.

She followed close behind.

Like she was hot on his trail and moving in for the ... what? Whatever it was, he didn't like it one bit.

'Is this it? Or have you got another place in Sydney?' she asked, following through the door and looking around. Not sounding impressed.

'No.'

'But you spend time there.'

'Sometimes.'

'On a case.'

'Sometimes.'

'And now?'

'Now what?'

'Are you on a case?'

'Me? Now? No.'

'Why don't we believe you?'

'We?'

That 'we' again.

'Me and Lucy.'

'Are you two on a case?'

'Us? No, why?'

'Just sounded like it.'

'Paranoia, Plant.'

'Where would we be without it?'

'That sounds like one of Fullalove's sayings.'

'You know Fullalove?'

'Know of him.'

'Not quite the same,' Plant said.

She nosed round the living room, stuck her head into the bedrooms, went into them and wandered around while Plant waited for the kettle to boil in the kitchen.

'It's all right,' she said, registering Plant's apprehension. 'I'm not going to suddenly leap on you and drag you into bed. I know you've been reading me. But you needn't worry. Not these days.'

He couldn't think of an appropriate response so he said nothing. Not even thank you. Thank you might have sounded a bit strange, anyway.

She came back out into the living room and nosed along the bookshelves lining a couple of the walls, but made no comment. It made him uneasy. What was she looking for, what had she seen? It was the sort of thing he did himself, check out the books people read, people of interest that is, when he was on a case.

He made the tea and took it back out to the veranda. Two cups with tea-bags and a jar of powdered milk with a spoon stuck in it. He didn't feel like offering biscuits. Fullalove had probably finished them all off, so he didn't bother looking for any. He waited for her to emerge and join him but it took some time.

'Lucy might think I'm checking up on her but you do a pretty thorough job of nosing around yourself,' he said.

She smiled graciously.

'I'm a novelist,' she said. 'That's what we do.'

'Is that so?'

'Always gathering material.'

'But gathering it about places rather than people. You're not one of those "interesting characters" novelists.'

'Places tell you a lot about the people in them.'

It was what he was afraid of.

'Ah well, pleased to be of assistance,' he said, though he wasn't. 'Make sure to send me a copy of the book when it comes out.'

'I'll let you have one at cost price,' she said.

'So,' he said, back in his deckchair, 'what can I do for you?'

'Nothing much that I can see,' she said. 'Just a neighbourly visit.'

'You're a neighbour?'

'Near enough.'

'Where?'

'Oh, just down the road. Near Mullum.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'Not long.'

'What did you pay for it?' he asked. Get a bit of financial background. Get on the attack with insensitive and intrusive questions.

'Renting,' she said. 'Just temporary. Till I go back East.'

'East?'

'Yes.'

'Middle East? Far East?'

'Wherever.'

'Doing what?'

'Oh, a bit of this, a bit of that. Writers' residencies. Writers' retreats. Teaching English. Whatever turns up.'

'And things turn up?'

'Sure.'

'Just like that?'

'No. Not just like that.'

'How, then?'

'By writing endless fucking applications, how else do you think?'

'I don't know. That's why I was asking.'

'Well now you know.'

'No, really? Who do you apply to?'

'Oh, Plant, is this an inquisition?'

'Just curious.'

'You're thinking of a change of career?'

'Why not?'

'Universities. Cultural foundations.'

'Department of Foreign Affairs?' he probed.

'Sure. They've got some cultural exchanges set up.'

'So who tells you about these things?'

'No one.'

'So how do you find out?'

'You look them up.'

'Where?'

'Where do you think? On the web. In magazines.'

'Sounds like a full-time job,' he said. 'When do you get time to write?'

'Whenever I get fixed up.'

'And then the royalties pour in?'

She smiled at him. She wasn't answering that one.

All very worthy. Hands across the oceans. Cultural exchanges. Writers' retreats. Like Yaddo, where the secretary or someone was an FBI informant for years. Collect the writers, check them out, get them talking, their beliefs, their politics, their usefulness, their dangerousness, get them pissed and see what they're up to. And which are the writers and which the spooks? Or are their roles interchangeable, coexistent? Couriers, pay-mistresses, cut-outs, agents of influence, honey traps. Pillow talk with diplomats, military, arms dealers, assassins. Did he see Mandy as an assassin? Well, someone has to do it. A steady income until the royalties roll in and then a regular supplement to subsidize their inevitable inadequacy.

If she hadn't called round for a neighbourly visit he wouldn't have thought of it. Mightn't have. Possibly not. But he was certainly thinking of it now. All in the beautiful morning. The gentle sun. The background twittering of the birdlife. The mournful lament of the dove.

She stayed about an hour. But it was enough to disrupt the whole morning. He was barely restored to equanimity when Fullalove returned and disrupted the rest of the afternoon.

'What's she up to?' Fullalove speculated. Like a dog with a bone he was never happier then when he had something to gnaw away at and speculate on. Even a broccoli stalk. 'She's obviously up to something.'

'Obviously? Like what?' Plant asked uncooperatively. 'It's not obvious

to me.'

'So that's what we have to find out.'

Another of those 'we's again.

'Why? What's the obligation?'

'Finding out the truth.'

Put like that it sounded extraordinarily high-minded. Plant groaned.

'That old fantasy. As if. Truth about what, anyway?'

'What she's up to.'

'Why would she be up to anything?'

'Why was she nosing around all those places in the East?'

'I don't know that she was nosing around.'

'You know she was nosing around here.'

'It certainly felt like it.'

'So put two and two together.'

'What, and make 666?'

'Interesting you should put it like that.'

'What do you mean?'

'The number of the beast. You obviously sense some deep evil.'

'Maybe,' Plant conceded.

'While at the same time fighting off a deep sexual attraction.'

'I have no sexual attraction for Mandy.'

'You may not realize it.'

'Yes I do.'

'So you do.'

'No I don't. I recognize that I don't have it.'

'Are you sure?'

'It would be a waste of time, anyway.'

'Why?'

'She's switched teams. She's playing for the other side now.'

'Really? Is that so? Ah well, that only adds to your unfulfillable yearning.'

'You should've been a novelist,' Plant said.

'I've often thought that,' Fullalove greed.

'You know your problem,' Plant said.

'Tell me.'

'You think everyone's dodgy.'

'And you don't? And they're not?'

'Not everyone.'

Fullalove grinned. 'But Mandy's got you worried.'

Plant admitted that she had.

'Well,' Fullalove said, 'we'll just have to sit and wait and see what turns up.'

Chapter Thirty-eight

Plant's morning inactivity was disrupted yet once more. An early phone call. Peremptory. Demanding. *News From The Dark Side*. Editor Angela Dark in person. In voice, anyway. Loud and clear.

'Plant!'

'Yup.'

'You got a moment? Are you busy?'

'Not really,' he admitted unguardedly.

'Not really?'

'Not at all.'

After all, why lie about it?

'I need to talk to you.'

'Feel free,' he offered. Insincerely. But it only involved listening. Hopefully. And having said he wasn't busy he didn't have much choice.

'No, not on the phone. In person.'

'Fair enough. But I'm up here and you're ...'

'I'm up here too,' she said, cutting him off.

'Oh. Really? Up here? Where?'

Was nowhere safe? No, nowhere was safe.

'I'm staying with Mandy.'

'Mandy? You know her?'

'Plant, if you ever read *News From The Dark Side* you'd know that she's one of my regulars.'

'Regular what?' he asked, loading his question with unspecified insinuation.

'Regular contributors, of course. What are you implying?'

'Ah, sorry about that, how could I have forgotten?'

'You never even knew, you lying hound.'

'Woof woof,' he said. 'Maybe not. Anyway, what do you want to talk about?'

'Not on the phone. Come over here and I'll tell you.'

He could've said "Wow" or "Can't wait", but chose restraint instead.

'Where?' he asked.

She gave him Mandy's address.

'When?' he asked.

'Now,' she said.

'Today?' he checked.

But the phone just buzzed. She had already gone.

How had he agreed to it? Had he even agreed? He tried running the conversation back in his head to see if he had said 'Yes' at any point. He was pretty sure he hadn't. Not that it made any difference.

He drove down to Mullumbimby through the gentle morning, the fields shining bright and green and cheerful, cattle grazing, birds pecking and singing, one of those God's in his heaven and all's well with the world days. At least he hoped so.

Angela was sitting on the front steps of Mandy's little weatherboard house.

'Mandy's writing,' she said, 'so sit out here so as not to disturb her.'

'Sure,' Plant agreed.

'So you got a character called Osbourne up here?' she asked, straight into it, no time-consuming preliminary courtesies.

'Gilbert Osbourne? *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*? I don't have him in custody but he's around.'

'What do you know about him?

'Not a lot, why?'

'I need to check him out.'

'Really? Wow. Well ...'

'What do you know about him?' Angela asked again.

'You want to hire my services?'

'No, I don't want to hire you, I just want to talk to you.'

'Oh,' Plant said. Not that he especially wanted to be hired. Not by Angela Dark. Not right now. 'About Osbourne?'

'Yes.'

'Well ...'

'I need to check him out,' she said again.

'So what he's up to?'

'That's what I need to find out.'

'He's just running a magazine as far as I can see. And a bookshop.'

'Oh, sure. But what for?'

'Money, I imagine,' Plant offered. 'It's the usual motivation for people like Osbourne, isn't it?'

'So why's he using Lady Caroline Lamb? Why's he doing this feminist pitch? Why's he gone all woke and progressive in his dotage?'

'I don't know,' Plant said. 'You tell me.'

'He's trying to put me out of business. He's trying to steal our subscribers and our advertisers, why else would he be doing it?'

'Maybe he believes in it.'

'Don't be ridiculous. What, Osbourne? Not him.'

'So you know him. I thought you said you needed to check him out.'

'His operation, not him.'

'With a view to putting him out of business.'

'With a view to protecting *News From The Dark Side* from whatever tricks he tries to pull.'

'You really think that's what he's up to, trying to put you out of business?'

'Why else would he be doing it?' she asked.

Mandy emerged from the house with a tray bearing coffee and croissants, butter and raspberry jam. 'You do drink coffee, do you, Plant, on occasions?'

'On occasions,' he agreed.

'You're not totally ascetic.'

'Not totally.'

'Monk-like. In some regards. Though probably not in all.'

Plant did his best to make his smile seem like a benediction.

'The hide of the man,' Angela said, trampling over the chit-chat of conversational trivia. 'He's never been remotely progressive in his whole wasted life, so why's he running that line now? To destroy me. It's the only explanation. So I thought I'd come up here and check him out. See what he's up to.'

'Couldn't you just do that online?'

After all, she was the great exponent of online journalism.

'Nothing like seeing what his set up is. What sort of staff he's got. How pricey an office. What his costs are.'

'Pick up some tips,' Plant said.

He sensed her scowling.

'How do you know he wants to put *The Dark Side* out of business?' Plant asked. 'Maybe he'll offer to buy you out.'

'You're always a bundle of joy, Plant. Always a cheerful answer.'

'Well, build up a publishing empire, then. Does that sound better?'

'Why would he want to do that?'

'It's what people do. Businessmen,' he said. 'And businesswomen,' he added hurriedly. 'You should be flattered. Take the money and run.'

'I don't want the money. I want to keep on publishing, I believe in *The Dark Side*. I've got principles. I've got beliefs.'

'I promise not to tell anybody,' Plant assured her.

'Why would he want to buy me out? It's not as if oodles of money are being made. If only.'

'Maybe money's not the issue.'

'So what then, he just wants to put me out of business? Bastard.'

'But he hasn't. Put you out of business.'

'No, and he's not going to either,' she said.

'So what do you actually know about Osbourne?' Angela asked. 'If anything,' she added, with her usual charm offensive.

'Nothing much. He offered Fullalove a job.'

'A job!' Angela said. 'Fullalove!'

'Well, an invitation to contribute to *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'Oh, that old freelance racket,' Mandy snorted. 'That's not a job.'

'I bet he says that to all the girls,' Angela said.

'Well, he certainly said it to this one,' Mandy said.

'What? He offered you a job?' Angela exploded. 'You traitor. You're deserting *The Dark Side*?'

'He offered me freelancing, not a job, and I haven't responded. Yet. But you want me as an exclusive, you better up the ante.'

'Why would you want to write for a bounder like that?'

'Bounder?'

'Creep, then.'

'A girl's gotta live. Anyway, I don't know that he is a bounder. Or a creep. Not especially. Is he any different from any other media editor-owner? They all seem the same to me. Devious, dubious, dishonest, double-faced. It goes with the territory.'

'No it doesn't,' Angela raged. 'I've always ...'

'Oh, notable exceptions, of course,' Mandy said, cutting her off, soothingly.

'Which is why I don't want to be forced to close down *News From The Dark Side* by Osbourne anyone else.'

'Well, don't,' Plant suggested.

'It's not as easy as that,' Angela said. 'Rent, electricity, staff, they're all costing more.'

'So you haven't been making lots of money and you wonder if he's been making any either. Which is why you want to nose around up here.'

He took her silence as assent.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Yet once more the early morning phone call disrupting Plant's peace and tranquillity. Earlyish. Fullalove emerged expectantly.

'Plant!' Angela Dark bellowed.

'At your service, Angela.'

'Good. That's exactly what I want. Can you take me up to Osbourne's bookshop?'

'Can I take you up to Osbourne's bookshop?'

'Yes. That's what I said. I need to check it out. The powerhouse of his empire. The proverbial gold mine. Old bastard.'

'Well ...'

'I can't ask Mandy. She writes in the mornings. I can't disrupt her work pattern.'

'Well ...' Plant tried again.

Fullalove waved a hand in front of Plant and then tapped himself on the chest. 'I'll take her' he mimed, nodding his head vigorously.

'You sure?' Plant asked.

'Sure,' Fullalove said.

'What's that?' Angela asked.

'Yes, no problem,' Plant said. 'On the way.'

He hung up before any more could be said, either by her or Fullalove. Not wanting her to hear Fullalove's voice. His arrival could be a splendid surprise. Almost worth going along to witness it. But then he'd end up having to drive her. He'd rely on Fullalove's reportage of the event. Looked forward to it.

'Thanks,' he said to Fullalove.

Angela was less than enthusiastic at Fullalove's arrival. And far from delighted at being transported in an ageing ute.

'Where's Plant?'

'Busy.'

'Bullshit.'

'Whatever,' he agreed.

'So why's he sent you?'

'He didn't. I offered.'

'Oh yes.'

'Sure.'

'Well I'll tell you now, there's no point in your hassling me to try and get published.'

'Me?' Fullalove asked. 'What would I hassle you about?'

'*News From The Dark Side*.'

'You want to poach me?'

'Poach you. What do you mean, poach you?'

'I've already got a gig. You want to steal me away?'

'Spare us. Steal you away from where?'

'*Mad, Bad and Dangerous*. Where else? Don't need to slip it in anywhere else.'

'I don't know who's the maddest, you working for him or him hiring you.'

'Thank you for your appreciation.'

'Appreciation? How did you get mixed up with him?'

'We go back a long way,' Fullalove said.

Angela groaned.

She groaned some more at the bookshop. Groaned at the archaic, gloomy, pre-digital world enshrined there. She visibly retracted herself into her signature red and black outfit. The colours of anarchy. And the colours of a few literary classics. *Le Rouge et le Noir.* Rufus Dawes of *His Natural Life*. The literary allusions forgotten, maybe never known. Just the insignia of an ageing libertarian.

'Dirty dusty dump,' she said.

'Should've worn a mask,' Fullalove advised her, ensconced in his.

'That wouldn't help. It gets inside your head, clogging up your

consciousness.'

'Filthy old books.'

'Exactly,' she said.

'Exac'ly,' Fullalove agreed, politely, but as if he were telling her how to pronounce it, not a wise thing to do.

'Get me out of here.'

'We're already out.'

Indeed they were, standing on the pavement in the hot, dusty late afternoon air.

'Have a walk on the beach,' he suggested, 'clear your head. It's not far.'

'No fucking way am I walking on any beach,' she said.

Books and beaches equally anathema.

Cyber woman, if not bionic woman.

'So where's the *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* office?'

'That's back in Byron.'

'So take me there.'

'Yes, ma'am. You want me to introduce you to him?'

'No I don't, I've already met him, and I don't want you anywhere around. Just drop me off and pick me up in an hour's time.'

'Yes, ma'am,' he said again. 'Which way would you prefer to go? Coastal scenic drive, back-roads, or motorway?'

'Fucking motorway,' she said. 'Forget fucking scenic drives and fucking back-roads.'

The motorway was scenic enough for Fullalove, anyway. It was all scenic for an inner-city dweller – sugar cane, corn, bananas, avocadoes, pasture, timber, hills, valleys, creeks, exits. Mount Warning always out there on the horizon. Wollumbin. And who knew what literary gems lay buried as landfill beneath the road surface? Fullalove relaxed back in the driving seat and invited them to find their way up through the tyres and his feet and legs to speak to him.

He dropped her off at the office. She looked round with pained

distaste at the surroundings, warehouses offering garden ornaments, discount mattresses, surfboards, instructed him to pick her up in an hour, and went in to confront Osbourne.

Fullalove picked her up an hour later. Angela was not one for undertaking a minute, laborious examination. She relied on her journalist's nose for sniffing out a story. And to spook Osbourne out. 'See how he likes it having someone nosing around his office.'

'How did he like it?' Fullalove asked her as she got back into the ute.

'Oh, the usual ingratiating guff and phoney charm. How could you ever know how he liked anything?'

'And?'

'And what?'

'Are you thinking of selling out to him?'

'Am I what? No bloody way. Not to him or to anybody.'

'Why not?'

'Why would I?'

' 'Cause you're broke.'

'No I'm bloody well not.'

'So you're not broke.'

'No, I'm not. And don't go around saying I am. Times are tough but *News From The Dark Side* is still in business.'

'So what did you find out about him?'

'Not a lot. Not much at all. But enough.'

'Is he making money, you reckon, or is he in the red?'

'He's not making any money out of those putrid old books. And they're supposed to be subsidizing *Mad, Bad and Dangerous.* And I can't see how that would be making anything. But how would you know?'

'You're the journalist.'

'Yes,' she said. 'That's how I know there's no way of knowing. Private company. No public records, financial or whatever.'

'Did you ask him?'

She gave Fullalove her familiar, filthy look.

'I am a journalist. I do know how to ask questions.'

'Get any answers?'

'No.'

'Tough.'

'Not at all. It's a giveaway. Somebody keeping it all that close to his chest has something to hide. Lots to hide, probably.'

'So he could be making millions.'

'Not from that shitty little publication and that rancid, filthy bookshop. But he could have backers.'

'Backers? What sort of backers?'

'Wealthy ones.'

'Which is how he keeps going.'

'Presumably.'

It was something. But not something that couldn't have been guessed. And who the backers were, and what wealth they had access to, and whether they even existed, remained unknown.

Chapter Forty

The next day *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* appeared featuring a substantial excerpt from Mandy's new book. Neither Osbourne nor Mandy had mentioned that it was coming. Fullalove, as befitted an interested investigator and a potential contributor, logged onto it first thing. Not a disruptively early first thing, but a civilized cup of tea and a smoke and a morning read first thing.

'Yoicks,' he said.

'Did you say "Yoicks"?'

'I could've. Possibly. I couldn't think what else to say. "Words failed me," as people used to say before words failed them altogether. Come and look at this. Triperoo.'

'Triperoo indeed,' Plant agreed. It seemed the right word. Right enough. 'Angela's going to just love that.'

'I'll give her a call and ask her if she's seen it,' Fullalove said.

'I wouldn't.'

'What, rage and reprisals?'

'At the very least.'

'I need to know.'

'No, you don't. You might like to. But that's just idle curiosity.'

'Not idle. Active curiosity at least. Maybe I'll phone Mandy first and see what the reaction was.'

The reaction was predictable. Angela had gone incandescent and stormed off in a rage.

'Called me a traitor! Me!' Mandy said. 'I'd offered her a pre-publication exclusive. Take her pick. Any excerpt. And she'd turned me down. Said it wasn't news. Of course it's not news. It's a novel. Osbourne ran it as a feature. It looks great.'

'But Angela didn't think so.'

'No, she was furious. I said, "Why? You turned it down so what's the

fuss?"

"'It wasn't our sort of thing," she said. "You know we don't run fiction."

"'So what's the problem?" I said.

"'It's not Osbourne's sort of thing, either. He never runs fiction."

"'He does now."

"'He's just trying to poach you. He's planning on stealing our contributors."

"'Well," I suggested, "don't let him. Give me a break."

"'What sort of a break?"

"'Run another excerpt."

"'Don't be absurd. Osbourne's already done it."

"'There's plenty more."

"'Not when it's been scooped."

"'Why not?"

"'Because the story's dead. End of story. Osbourne got in first."

'Then she phoned a cab and set off for the airport. That'd probably cost her a couple of hundred bucks and more. Refused my offer of a lift. I don't even know if she's going to be able to change her ticket and get a flight.'

'So she wasn't pleased.'

'Like I said, incandescent.'

'Ah well, so you'll be writing for Osbourne now.'

'Maybe. We'll see.'

'See what?'

'Who knows?' she said enigmatically.

'Does Osbourne?'

'Ha ha!' she said.

Chapter Forty-one

'All you can do,' Fullalove said, 'is speculate how society is run. You can never know for sure. But you can make some shrewd guesses. You're not going to get justice, closure, retribution. Just a sense of what's going on. What might be. Maybe. Probably. All you can hope for is to lift the veil a bit. Forget changing anything.

'The way I figure it, these operations are like franchises. There's an overall plan, what the purpose is, but it's up to the individual franchise holders how they run it. I mean, it doesn't have to be a bookshop to launder money, it could be an antique shop or an art gallery or a caravan park. And depending what it is, you have some secondary operation. With the bookshop they've been doing a bit of book purging. That's within the overall guidelines but it's optional. Laundering money is the priority, purging books is an added bonus. And *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*, that's another option. There's other funding going into media, obviously, to keep it controlled. But it's within the overall plan: control or infiltrate or buy up and close down.

'There could be lots of little operations like this going on when you come to think about it. More effective than one blanket control. Makes it look like genuine democratic creativity, new magazines and online sites popping up. As if.

'It's just a continuation of what they've been doing for years. Running drugs. Funding propaganda. All under some shaky cover. Remember Irangate, remember Cultural Freedom. So, someone gets payrolled, set up, put out in the field and left to run autonomously. Left to their own initiatives.

'Dope growing isn't the only operation requiring money-laundering. Osbourne could've been grooming underage girls to have sex with powerful political and financial figures who can then be blackmailed into doing dodgy political and financial deals. There's no end to these operations. At least Osbourne seems comparatively civilized.'

'Well, at least he's growing dope, if you're right. Can't get much more civilized than that,' Plant said. 'Hasn't the irony of this struck you? He's selling inexpensive second-hand books, running an online magazine that's offered you some work, and he's growing dope, and you're pursuing him like he's some evil villain. The bookshop may be dodgy and *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* pretty bland but basically he's providing a public service, isn't he? To your way of thinking. He's providing dope. So why are you hounding him?

'I'm not hounding him. I'm just checking him out.'

'Because you think he's an instrument of the security services and ruling class oppression. But he's a liberator in relation to dope. Doesn't that strike you as odd?'

'Where do you think the dope came from in the first place?'

'The creator?' Plant suggested.

'In the 1960s.'

'Dunno.'

'The American security services, obviously. Break up the anti-war movement by getting the protesters hooked. Get the peace movement activists stoned and spaced out. Stop them from moving into hard-left direct action, which some of them were starting to do. Why was dope suddenly everywhere? Acid, too. The CIA was researching it, Timothy Leary was testing it for the United States navy. They were promoting drug use to undermine the political underground.

'And it worked. The anti-war protestors got stoned and wiped out. They went to live in communes and grew their own dope and dropped out of activist politics. A lot more just stayed in the city and got stoned and gave up activism as too much effort. So the anti-war movement was purged. The hard left was left with insufficient numbers to achieve anything. And so, half a century and more later, they keep on supplying the dope because it works. Cuts down protest. Vegetablizes potential activists. Why would they stop running it?'

'I still find it a disturbing paradox,' Plant said.

'Tough. Because that's the way it is.'

'So why don't they legalize it and get everyone stoned and uncommitted?'

'Like they did with booze after they gave up on prohibition? Because it would look too official. Like booze. Drugs are kept illegal for all the troublemakers who are suspicious of anything official. They're the people they want to keep stoned and out of action. The people who think that if it's illegal it must be all right.'

'So why's it legalized in all those states in the USA?'

'Oh, Plant, how do I know?'

'I thought you knew everything.'

'Sure. Most things. Well, it was a way of raising revenue. And there are still enough illegal unofficial drugs for people who only trust the illegal.'

'So why are they doing it now? There's no anti-war movement.'

'Really? There's always wars. Somewhere or other. Hadn't you noticed? So they keep these little operations going. It's no big deal. Not a number one priority. Just some discretionary funding. Give it a go. See how it works out. They're probably funding a dozen or more projects like this. See which ones take off. So no, it doesn't look spectacular, global, et cetera, et cetera. But it might end up big or it might not. There's probably scores of trial projects like this they run, just to keep every option open, never know what might suddenly be needed, what might work out, what the future will bring in terms of what drugs people use, what people read, what influences them. So they keep all these projects active, ready for any emergency, cultural, political, economic, military. They're all on hand, don't need to try and set up something new for a new emergency which would take too long to get up and running anyway.

'And they're probably small operations. They don't have to be big. But lots of them. And they're all stand alone. So if one gets exposed in some way it doesn't affect the others. Whereas if it was just one big operation, there's more chance of it getting noticed and if anything goes

wrong and if it's put out of action, they've got nothing else, nothing in reserve. So Osbourne's probably just one of many.'

'Sure,' Plant said, 'but do you have any actual hard evidence for any of this?'

'Historical evidence of the way it's done.'

'But about Osbourne specifically.'

'My intuition. My observations.'

'But it's all unconfirmed suspicions.'

'Deduction. Classic crime-solving.'

'No it isn't,' Plant said. 'What you've done is create a mirror image of yourself. You've invented this fantasy figure who cancels the sort of books you preserve, who believes in the liberal causes that you despise, someone who has a bookshop up and running, which you still don't, and who edits a journal which is something that you used to do till you were sacked, someone who basically in the eyes of the world is successful, which you definitely are not.'

'Thanks for those kind words,' Fullalove said.

'Any time.'

'Let's be realistic,' Fullalove said. 'We don't have access to surveillance records, CCTV, phone taps, bank records and all the stuff that they use for solving crime nowadays. We don't have access to that technology. So what do we do?'

'Go on, tell me,' Plant said.

'Our only method is suspicion and speculation. Observation and a knowledge of history. Any history will do. It's all plots and conspiracies and betrayals and treachery and brutality and exploitation. But once you know the tricks they got up to in the past, then you can see what they're up to now. When you look around you at some interesting topic, you've got a context. Which is more than you'll get from any story in the media. That's why they want to marginalize history along with literature. Stamp out the interesting stories.

'But if you've got a sense of paranoia and conspiracy nurtured by reading the classics and history, then you've got a functional profiling system. You can see what's going on.'

'But you've still got no hard evidence about Osbourne.'

'No.'

'We can't get into his bank records.'

'No.'

'Nor his phone and internet.'

'No.'

'Or even have a look around his house and farm.'

'Probably not.'

'So not much of a case.'

'You said you didn't want another case.'

'Did I?'

'Frequently.'

'Really? Ah well, fair enough. No one's hiring me, anyway.'

'Why do you need to be hired?'

'To take on a case.'

'Hire yourself.'

'Why would I do that?'

'You want to know the truth about the world around you, hire yourself. Your moral duty.'

'My what?'

'Your responsibility to reveal the way the world is.'

'But like you said, we've got no resources. How do I know if it's true or not?'

'True?' Fullalove said. 'No one can ever know for sure if anything's true.'

Chapter Forty-two

'I'm going to have to check out this farm of Osbourne's,' Fullalove said.

'Really? Why?' Plant asked.

'Why? To see what he's up to, that's why.'

'I thought you thought you knew what he's up to.'

'I'd still like to make sure. See what's really going on.'

'You reckon? If he's growing dope like you think, you're not going to be able to just walk in and have a look round. What if he's got people working out there? I don't see him as a hands-on grower doing it all himself. Out there on his knees transplanting seedlings.'

'Your lady friend on her knees beside him,' Fullalove said.

'I doubt it. I don't see him doing the hard graft of growing. Have you checked out his fingernails? Full of soil, or carefully manicured?'

'I'll have a close look next time,' Fullalove said.

'He's probably got a couple of illegal immigrants looking after the crop. Sleeping in a hut and hiding out. Hard to know. Until you go out there and blunder into them. And if he doesn't have people out there working on the crop, he'll have security cameras.'

'So what? What's he going to do if I turn up on camera.'

'Set savage dogs onto you,' Plant suggested.

Fullalove paused. 'Yeah, maybe. I still want to check it out, though. At least have a look from the road.'

'And you don't think that will alert him?'

'Can't see why it should. And if it does, I'll just say I was in the area so I dropped in to see him.'

'And you were just wandering around his property looking for dope plants.'

'We'll deal with that when we come to it.'

'There's no "we" in this,' Plant said. 'You're on your own on this one.'

'No, don't be like that. Just come along for the ride and sit in the car. Then if someone shows up while I'm in there you can give me a warning call.'

'And what will you do then?'

'Keep out of sight.'

'No,' Plant said.

'Go on.'

'No.'

'Please.'

'It's not an issue of politeness. It's ...'

'What?'

'More like a matter of life and death.'

'So. I need your help.'

'No way.'

'Where did you say his farm was?'

'Out towards Nimbin, according to Lucy.'

'Like on what road?'

'No idea.'

'Give her a call.'

'You give her a call,' Plant said. 'She's just going to think it's fishy. Why would you want to go out there?'

'As a fellow-bookseller.'

'They're not going to believe you.'

'Probably not. What about Mandy? Didn't you say she delivered the books to the movie studios?'

'Yes.'

'So she must know where it is to pick up the books.'

'Except when I saw her she was dropping them off at the bookshop.'

'Why?'

'To make sure she doesn't go to the farm, I imagine.'

Fullalove groaned.

'Yeah, probably,' he agreed.

No one would give Fullalove the address. Lucy said she had never been there. Mandy said the same.

'You know what I'm going to have to do?' he asked Plant.

'You tell me.'

'I'm going to have to stake him out. Hang out round the corner in that industrial estate and follow him home when he leaves the *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* office.'

'And?'

'Keep a safe distance behind, and check out where he goes.'

'And you pull over when you see him slowing down in front of you to turn onto his track, and his CCTV cameras pick you up as having a look.'

'Assuming he has cameras.'

'If he's running a dope plantation I imagine he'd have them. And carefully concealed, too. All you'd do is alert him.'

'Maybe. Be interesting to see how he'd respond.'

'If you live to see it.'

'There is that, I guess. You reckon?'

'Personally, I wouldn't risk it.'

'No, you probably wouldn't.'

'And you won't, when you come to your senses.'

'Maybe,' Fullalove shrugged. 'Maybe not.'

Fullalove tried a couple of times to follow Osbourne from the office. The first time Osbourne drove into Byron and parked and went into a pub. Fullalove decided against hanging around. The next time he lost Osbourne in the tangle of rush-hour traffic to and from the motorway, keeping discreetly behind and out of sight and then losing him altogether.

'Third time lucky?' Plant asked. 'Or is the universe warning you it's not going to work out?'

Fullalove considered it as an interesting possibility, but made no final decision.

'Remember Mount Warning,' Plant reminded him. 'Be warned.'

The third time Fullalove got lucky, following Osbourne out of the industrial estate and this time not losing him, keeping at a distance as he drove into the hinterland, out towards Nimbin. When Osbourne turned off the road and stopped to unlock the gate into what was presumably his property, Fullalove pulled up on the grass verge.

Osbourne locked the gate behind him and drove along a track that led away from the road. The gate announced 'Lock the Gate: To Coal and Gas Companies.Warning: Trespass is an offence', 'Say No to Gas Seam Mining', and the old traditional 'Beware of the Dogs'. Plural dogs. Beyond it, all that Fullalove could see was bush stretching out of sight. He considered getting out and making his way along the track and trying to look around, but thought better of it. The house was presumably there. And everything else. But no point in getting savaged by savage dogs. He didn't hear any; but he probably wouldn't until they were at his throat. He sat there, wondering whether he should just wait and see who if anyone turned up, or see if any illegal immigrants left after a day's tending the crop, but nobody came, nobody went, nothing happened. It was like a Samuel Beckett play. If he stayed any longer he was risking getting noticed. He probably already had been. He couldn't see any surveillance cameras, but it would be easy enough to have them positioned there amidst the trees. He probably shouldn't have come, shouldn't have parked there and hung around. But on the other hand, if Osbourne was alerted that he was under observation, then he might be provoked into some revealing action.

Chapter Forty-three

Shameless gave Fullalove a call. Or, more precisely, phoned Plant's landline. Fullalove was still asleep.

'What's he want this time?' Plant asked.

'He wants to meet me up at the bookshop to talk about collaborating on this novel which he reckons has got movie potential that's he's just about to set up.'

'And you believe him?'

'It's all a gamble,' Fullalove said.

'Life, or movies?' Plant asked.

'Mandy's picking me up here and taking me up to the movie studios when she drops off the books they've ordered,' Shameless told Fullalove.

'And you've got a meeting set up?'

'I'm taking a copy of my novel outline up there. Perfect opportunity. And if I can say we've got another one in development ...'

'And do you?'

'That's the one I want to talk to you about,' Shameless said. 'I've got an outline here, and if you could ...'

'You want me to write it for you?'

'Well, with me, not exactly for me. We'll collaborate.'

Lucy peered over the counter, rolling her eyes in sympathy.

'What time's Mandy picking you up?' Fullalove asked.

Shameless looked at his watch.

'In about ninety minutes.'

'Aren't you a bit early?'

'Don't want to miss her.'

'You need to calm down,' Fullalove said. 'Let's go get a coffee and have a walk on the beach and you can tell me about the novel.'

'Don't want to miss her,' Shameless said again.

Fullalove drove the couple of minutes down to the beach. They sat

in the car looking at the sea and the horizon. Neither made any move to get out and take a walk. Shameless babbled on about the great potential of his potential movie.

'You're giving up journalism for fiction?' Fullalove asked.

'Not especially,' Shameless said. 'It's more that it's giving up me.'

'I know the feeling.'

'How sound is Osbourne, would you say? Didn't you work for him years ago?'

'He sacked me.'

'So you know what it's like. You lost your soap box too.'

'What happened to you?' Fullalove asked.

'Change of editor. Lost my column.'

'But you've still got a line into *Mad, Bad and Dangerous*.'

'For the moment. But *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* is pretty much the end of any line anyway. End of the road or whatever. If I could just pin down this movie deal ...'

Fullalove produced a joint, took a few drags on it, and passed it across to Shameless. Shameless puffed away without returning it.

Which is how Shameless came to be sitting stoned beside Mandy as they drove up the Gold Coast Highway and were pulled over for an allegedly random breath test. Which wouldn't have been a problem if it hadn't been for the sniffer dogs who scrabbled around excitedly over the boxes they were carrying. All too excitedly. Sniffing out the marijuana packed along with the books.

Mandy tested negative for drink and drugs. But when they tested Shameless for good measure, despite his complaints that he wasn't driving so he shouldn't be tested, he came up positive for THC. And the consignment of marijuana being shipped to the studio turned out to be substantial. Commercial quantity. Intent to supply.

Shameless and Mandy were both held overnight. When the police checked through Shameless's phone calls and emails they found his

article on decriminalizing cannabis. The article Fullalove had written. The one Shameless had put his name to. His claims that he hadn't written it were disregarded.

They kept Shameless in custody and let Mandy out. Mandy had been quite open with the police about where the boxes were from and where they were going. She was just the driver, she assured them, and knew nothing about the details of what she was carrying. Books for the movie studio she assumed, she knew nothing about the marijuana. It took a bit of time for the Queensland police to liaise with the New South Wales drug squad. But not long. Finding the address of Osbourne's farm presented no great difficulty. The raid on the plantation got a prime spot on television news, splendid mature plants being hacked down and thrown on the flames.

Plant and Fullalove watched it as the news ran through the channels, three thirty, four o'clock, five, six, six thirty and seven.

'What a criminal waste,' Fullalove sighed.

'Tragic,' Plant said.

'Yeah, tragic but exciting. Let's hope they're only burning a few token plants for show and putting the rest on the market as per usual. Exciting, innit? You can't still say you're bored up here, not even you, Plant.'

'It's like a book burning,' Plant said.

'You've said it! That'll be next. How did you know? What sort of mind have you got? They'll burn the books they seized along with the dope.'

'They can't burn them, they need them for a movie.'

'Really?' Fullalove said.

'What do you mean, "really?"'

'What movie?'

'The one they were hired for.'

'You reckon? Have you seen any movies lately?'

'Not …'

'Or any tv recently?

'Sure.'

'Have you seen any bookshelves dressing the sets in those crime shows you watch?'

'Well …'

'Have you seen any signs of any books at all in recent television?'

'Well …'

'We should've realised,' Fullalove said. That 'we' again. 'Ghostly Sperrit was right. Books are finished. No one puts books into television crime series or comedies any more. No one hires them for movie sets. You can see them in the background all the time in old movies and old television. But not in anything being made now. Forget hiring out books. Forget books altogether. It was a nice cover story but it was out of date and we should've seen through it. He was just selling weed. Wholesale.'

Chapter Forty-four

Another blissful morning of peace, gentle sun, gentle breeze, a cup of tea and a smoke. Sitting out on the veranda at peace with the world. And then the calm disrupted by the menacing sound of a vehicle being driven up the track and into view and parked. Lucy and Mandy stepped out of the Land Rover.

'Thought it was best not to phone,' Lucy said.

'Ominous,' Plant said.

He went indoors and brought out a couple more chairs.

'More than ominous,' Mandy added. 'I just spent a night in the cells.'

'You're a novelist,' Plant said. 'Isn't that what you said that novelists do, go looking for material?'

Mandy gave a threatening smile.

'But they let you out,' Fullalove observed.

'Well, obviously yes. Here I am.'

'Must have good contacts,' Fullalove said.

'Ha ha,' she said. 'Shameless is still in there.'

'How's he handling it?'

'Writing his prison diary. He's already offered it to *News From The Dark Side*. Angela leapt at it.'

'Well, not much point in offering it to Osbourne for *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* any more, is there?' Plant pointed out.

'Could have made the sort of book Osbourne might have published,' Fullalove said.

'Except that it's going to have all the dirt on Osbourne,'

'Some of it,' Fullalove corrected.

'He's only been in there a day, how's he going to get a book out of it?' Plant asked.

'Recycle some of the other inmates' jottings from the prison walls,' Fullalove suggested.

'He's asked me for a few paragraphs to set the context. You know,

getting busted and being breathalysed,' Mandy said.

'And he can copy down the centuries of convict graffiti,' Fullalove continued. 'Helps fill it out. And he can always recycle it in his crime novel.'

'He's not even in gaol. He's only on remand,' Mandy said

'Same difference as far as Shameless is concerned.'

Lucy took over. 'Let's start from the beginning. You've seen the news.'

Yes, they had seen the news. Several times.

'Well, we can't give you too much detail, obviously, official secrets and all that.'

'Ah, that old official secrets number,' Fullalove said with heavy weariness. 'Of course.'

Plant groaned inwardly. At least he hoped it was inwardly. So Lucy had kept up her late husband's contacts all the time. He should have known. Maybe at some level he had known and that was why he had kept his distance. Maybe.

'We've been watching Osbourne for a while,' Lucy said.

'Who's we?' Fullalove asked.

'It doesn't matter who.'

'Meaning, you're not going to tell us.'

'There's no need to know.'

'Oh, now we're on the old need to know game, are we?'

'Shut up, Fullalove,' Plant said.

'Thank you,' Lucy said. 'Right. To begin with, the plantation was set up as an entrapment operation some time ago.'

'We'd worked that out,' Fullalove said.

'Who by?' Plant asked.

'One of the agencies.'

'But you're not telling us which one.'

'It doesn't matter which one. It could even have been closed down by now.'

'The agency?'

'Yes. They're always setting up new ones and combining them and closing them down.'

'Go on.'

'So, Osbourne's been running this entrapment operation and syphoning off all this cash.'

'Ah, so that's what the problem was. Not illegal drugs, but money, money, money,' Fullalove chortled. 'Why didn't you just close him down?'

'We don't have those powers. We're just intelligence gathering.'

'And someone else gets to do the dirty work. The terminating with extreme prejudice.'

'Yes. Anyway, we were still keeping him under observation.'

'For growing weed and laundering money.'

'Amongst other things. We don't really know who Osbourne's working for. Or if he was working for anyone at all. It's still unclear. Which is why we were letting him keep operating. No need to stir it all up until we were ready.'

'Because there might have been lots of similar rackets.'

'Well, some, maybe. I don't know about lots.'

'Really?' Fullalove said. 'I do.'

'And you've got hard evidence?'

He sniffed and tapped his nose.

'I can sense it.'

'With that skill, it's a wonder no one's ever recruited you,' Lucy said.

Mandy laughed.

Fullalove gave an enigmatic smile.

'It's all nicely pat and convenient,' he said. 'I mean how do we know you haven't been working for Osbourne all along? And now you're just bluffing it out. Pretending to be working for some unknown anonymous agency.'

'You don't know,' Mandy said. 'You're not meant to.'

'Exac'ly.'

'So where's Osbourne now?' Plant asked.

'Vanished.'

'Brilliant.'

'Thanks to you two,' Lucy said.

'Us?' Plant and Fullalove exclaimed, roughly in chorus.

'Yes. You freaked him out. He knew you'd worked together on cases in the past. He figured this was another one and you were onto him.'

'We were,' Fullalove said.

'And he spotted you. And ran.'

'Perhaps. Or so you say.'

'I do say. Sloppy work.'

She was probably right. But no point in conceding it.

'Or maybe he spotted you,' Fullalove said. 'Maybe he spotted what Angela Dark was up to, when you got her to check him out for you.'

'Well, it was in her own interest, too,' Mandy said.

'So who were you checking him out for?' Lucy asked.

'No one,' Fullalove said.

'Who hired you?'

'No one hired me,' Plant said.

'I knew from the beginning you were on a case,' Lucy reminded him. 'I said so.'

'I wasn't. There is no case.'

'Your last case, maybe, now you've screwed this one up.'

'*Plant's Last Case*,' Mandy said. 'It makes a fetching title.'

'There is no case. There never was.'

'How about *Plant's Lost Case*, then?' Mandy said.

'Just two overgrown boys getting out of their depth,' Lucy added.

'You're the guys out of your depth,' Fullalove said. 'You've managed to lose your suspect. We were only observers.'

'Muddying the waters,' Lucy said.

'You should have put up a warning sign. "Under Investigation. Keep Clear."'

'You freaked him out. Getting too nosy. You were too obvious. He

knew Plant was a private eye.'

'Used to be,' Plant said.

'So he got ready to run.'

'And so you got the cops to set up the random breath test so it would look like it was just chance that nailed him and not the result of long-term surveillance. And that way you got the dope delivery intercepted and that triggered the raid on his farm,' Fullalove said.

'You don't think we'd do something like that, surely.'

'Sure I do. But he was too smart. Or his contacts were too good. He heard about the plan before the cops could raid the farm and nab him.'

'Certainly seems like he's disappeared.'

'And now he just gets himself a good lawyer and keeps out of sight or goes overseas and nothing ends up sticking to him.'

'Probably,' Lucy agreed. 'It seems he only rented the house, not the whole property. So they'll probably decide they can't pin the dope growing onto him.'

'Convenient,' Plant said. 'So who owns the farm?'

'Oh, some tangle of holding companies and the usual wheels within wheels.'

'So some agency or other.'

'Probably.'

'What happens to the bookshop now Osbourne's disappeared?' Fullalove asked.

'Good question. Don't get your hopes up,' Lucy advised.

'Is it going to be up for sale? You're not thinking of buying it?'

'Maybe. Could be. And Mac Arber's been on the phone about it.'

'Mac Arber,' Fullalove snapped. 'What's he up to?'

'Thinking of buying it, presumably. I don't know whether he wants the shop or just the stock.'

'Had your eye on it, did you, Fullalove?' Mandy asked.

'I doubt that it has sufficient turnover to pay the rent,' Fullalove said.

'But with your stock of disgusting and depraved and disapproved of

titles, it might do well,' Plant said. 'Assuming you go online.'

Fullalove disregarded them. 'So what's happening to *Mad, Bad and Dangerous* now?' he asked.

'Another good question,' Lucy smiled. 'I've already had Angela Dark sniffing around that one. And Mandy's got some ideas of her own.'

Fullalove swore. He'd been trying not to, but it was all too much.

'Had your eye on that too, did you, Fullalove? Thinking of buying yourself a soapbox?' Mandy asked. More stated than asked.

'So what are you telling me?' he said. 'That you two stuffed up a surveillance operation and now you're dividing the profits from selling the spoils between you?'

Lucy laughed.

'How elegantly you put it. I suppose it does look a bit like that.'

'A bit!' Fullalove snorted.

'He really does snort,' Mandy said. 'I'd never heard it before I heard Fullalove, so I've never written it. Snorted. It's good, I'll use that.'

'You're writing about Fullalove as well as Plant?' Lucy asked.

'The lot. *Plant's Last Case*.'

'You can't call it that,' Plant howled. 'No one ever hired me. There never was any case.'

'There is now,' Mandy said. 'Or there will be when I finish writing it.'

'And when will that be?' he heard himself asking.

'Might be a while, I've got another project to do first,' Mandy smiled. 'In the meantime I'll say farewell.'

'Farewell?' Plant repeated.

'I'm off in a couple of days.'

'Off to where?'

'The East,' she said.

'Oh yes. Far, Middle or Near?' Fullalove asked.

'Oh, wherever my fancy takes me. Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria.'

'Really. All the latest tourist spots. How did you manage that?' Fullalove asked.

'By betraying my beloved fiction in favour of fact.'

'Fact?'

'I've signed up to write a travel book.'

'Oh yes, that sort of fact,' Fullalove said. 'Your next assignment. Covered with a generous advance and some government travel grant on top of it, no doubt.'

'Something like that,' she agreed.

'Convenient.'

'Absolutely.'

'So a bit of local colour, and a bit of what Plant used to advertise as investigative reporting on the side.'

'Till he took up early retirement,' Mandy said. Somewhat unnecessarily, Plant felt. But it served to avoid answering Fullalove's question.

'That is,' Mandy added, 'if he actually did take early retirement. Maybe he's been working on cases all the time.'

'Much like you were, in fact,' Fullalove said.

Mandy raised her eyebrows and said nothing.

And then Plant's landline rang. He got up from the veranda and went inside to answer it.

'Hello,' he said, cautiously, never say who you are.

'Fullalove! Is he there?'

'Who wants to know?' Plant asked.

'Just get him.'

'Who should I say is calling?'

'Jacqueline Gold.'

'Agent Orange! How are you? What do you …'

'Just get him,' she said again.

'. . . want Fullalove for?' he tailed off and didn't wait for the answer that he knew would not be forthcoming.

He came back out. 'Fullalove!' he called. 'Agent Orange.'

Fullalove scuttled inside to the phone.

'Yes,' he said. 'Sure,' he said. 'Why not?' he added. 'Fine,' he agreed.

Plant, Lucy and Mandy listened attentively, with only Fullalove's responses to interpret.

'Triperoo,' he announced, coming back out to join them.

'She wants you to write a book,' Plant said.

'How did you know that?' Fullalove asked, his moment of revelation undermined.

'Why else would she phone?'

'True enough,' Fullalove conceded. 'So yeah, it's all under control. She's got this offer.'

They waited.

'You'll never believe it,' he said.

'No,' Mandy agreed.

'She's already lined up a deal.'

'About what?' Lucy asked.

'Have a guess.'

'The true adventures of Gilbert Osbourne and his dope plantation, obviously,' Plant said. 'The criminal underpinnings of a media mogul.'

'How did you know that? And he's hardly a mogul.'

'Obvious, isn't it?' Plant said. 'No problem finding publishers eager to bid for an exposé of one of their own. As long as their own hands are clean and somebody else is writing it for them. And with a female agent happy to be rid of another dead white male, she'd have them all slavering for it. Even if he isn't a mogul. He's a man, which is bad enough. True? More to the point, how did she find out about it?'

'She knows things,' Fullalove said.

'Meaning you told her? Is that how it happened? You gave her a call and made her a proposal?'

'Back in print again,' Fullalove announced gleefully, ignoring Plant. 'And with a cash advance. Just waiting for me to sign on the dotted line.'

'*Fullalove's First Folio*,' Mandy offered.

Fullalove grinned. Mandy grinned back.

'Right,' Lucy smiled. 'Anything else, or is that it?'

Now they were down to Any Other Business.

Plant brought it up.

'So are you going too?' he asked Lucy.

'Me? Going where?'

'Off to the East.'

'Off to the East? Me? Heavens no. Why would I do that?'

'To go with Mandy.'

'Why would I want to do that?'

'Aren't you two an item now?' he asked, nodding his head towards Mandy.

'What? Who told you that?' Lucy laughed.

'Mandy, actually. She said you were playing for the other team these days.'

'Did she now? Well, that's not strictly correct.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, you know, up to a point.'

'And?'

'But not necessarily exclusively.'

He heard himself attempt a response. More grunt than utterance.

'Oh, you haven't been brooding on that all this time?' Lucy said. 'And getting it all wrong, of course. Oh, Plant! Is that why you haven't asked me out for dinner again? I thought it was because you were being paranoid about coming to somewhere called Point Danger.'

She smiled at him winningly. Was that the word, winningly? How about lasciviously? No, no such luck. Tauntingly, more like.

'Oh, Plant, how are we going to get you up and running? Maybe we should write a book together. Everyone else seems to be writing one. Shameless, Mandy, Prickett, Fullalove. Maybe we should write up your best cases now that Mandy's got another project. You could tell me all the intimate details. Get you motivated again.'

'Oh no,' he muttered.

'Don't say you can't remember them.'

'If he can't remember them, I can,' Fullalove offered.

'How about it, Plant?' Lucy persisted.

He got up off his chair again and looked around

'Hello,' Plant heard her call. 'Hello, anyone there? Lucy calling.'

Silence seemed the best strategy.

He stepped off the veranda and walked across to where he could look out onto the stretching bush. Maybe this was a good time to take that walk. Find out how far it was to climb to the furthermost border of his property where he'd never yet been. Or maybe not. Maybe just get in the car and drive down to the beach where he'd enjoyed so many solitary walks. Or maybe neither. When in doubt, do nothing. Which is what he'd been trying to do all along. Indecision. Like boredom, there was quite a lot to be said for it. He was getting to appreciate both.

Books by Michael Wilding from Arcadia & Australian Scholarly

THE PRISONER OF MOUNT WARNING ISBN 978192 1509568

'With a detective called Plant and a journey from Sydney to the dope fields of Byron Bay, the private-eye novel has come a long way from Raymond Chandler ... the detective novel's move into an era of magic mushrooms and free love.' *Sydney Morning Herald.*

'If this was as much fun to write as it is to read, Michael Wilding must have enjoying writing *The Prisoner of Mount Warning.* A take on the secret world, mainstream and underground journalism, Writers' Centres, the counter culture and much else, the book is a heady ride from Sydney to Byron Bay and the Gold Coast with Plant, resting writer, investigating something that might have happened but perhaps not. Wilding has created a world both funny and creepy for Plant and the reader.' – Peter Corris.

'This satirical odyssey from an Australian literary legend has his protagonist heading north to find himself, among other things. Charles Dorritt recovers from a breakdown by doing a writing course and decides to write of his torture and slavery at the hands of the security services. He's pursued by Plant, who's been hired to dissuade him from revealing all … Wilding was at the forefront of a rebellious Australian literary movement in the '70s; in this book, he weaves a narrative of personal, literary and political dimensions into an entertaining yarn.' – Phil Brown, *Brisbane News.*

THE MAGIC OF IT ISBN 978192 1875373

'The truth in this fiction is at least as entertaining as what has been invented. This a clever, offbeat rendering of a crime story with a smattering of illustrations by the great Australian artist Garry Shead and a protagonist who surely will be back.' – Emma Young, *Sydney Morning Herald.*

'Wilding's comedy often has a decidedly political tinge. Indeed, Revill might well be speaking for the author when he bemoans "the great degradation of the times", by which he seems to mean the triumph

of greed, the loss of idealism, and the general dumbing-down of everything.' – Jeffrey Poacher, *Australian Book Review*.

ASIAN DAWN ISBN 978192 1875397

'A compelling narrative with a cast of enigmatic figures. The exotic bar singer, the speech writer for hire, the publisher with guerrilla connections, the sex-addicted expatriate and the missing political scientist are only some of the fascinating cast of characters … Wilding blends his wit with the comic and the bizarre in a novel that surprises by its twists and turns. This is a novel that enhances our understanding of the Australian-Asian relationship while at the same time providing an exciting, fast-moving thriller.' – Irina Dunn, *Network News*.

'*Asian Dawn* is a fast-paced read with lots of seedy sex and compromising secrets, plus a few well aimed jabs at the academic world.' – Cameron Woodhead, *Sydney Morning Herald*.

IN THE VALLEY OF THE WEED ISBN 978192 5333978

'The Plant novels … are hybrids of satire and crime fiction, too funny to be called bleak, but concealing a complex seriousness of purpose. At the instigation of his old friend Fullalove, Plant in his capacity as private detective goes looking for an academic who has been suspended for thoughtcrime and has subsequently disappeared. The least attractive aspects of neoliberalism and its consequences come in for some savage critique in this intermittently hilarious novel.' – Kerryn Goldsworthy, *The Age*.

'Wilding's satirical edge never dulls, whether he is arraigning literary parasites, complacent dropouts or jaded retired academics reduced from six-hour lunches to a dreary vegan regimen. Wilding ranges across social types that he knows intimately and acerbically. His is an urbanity more tinged with disdain than sympathy. *In the Valley of the Weed* is another of his reckonings with strata of Australian society that are often despised and feared by the right-wing commentariat. Wilding's understanding is much more astute.' – Peter Pierce, *Weekend Australian*.

LITTLE DEMON ISBN 9781925588736

'Where typical thrillers have mindless action, Wilding provides high-speed subconsciously revealing dialogue, and touch and go referentially ... Equally, the action, as reported by unreliable narrators, is open to various interpretations about ranges of deception where Plant can speculate but hardly contemplate. Such levels of complexity are made to seem entirely convincing and natural by the fluent progress of Wilding's frictionless prose style – but one that can pause to remind us we are reading a major novelist ... *Little Demon*, in its convoluted but also disarmingly, confrontingly and in several senses ultimate analysis, both offers and erases the notion of simple judgements about people and the past. This is what the thriller at its best can do: Wilding is creating a twenty-first century, southern-hemisphere, post-democracy version of the instrument that Collins and Hammett shaped to realise the appearances and apparitions of their own apparently confident contexts. Plant grows on you.' – Stephen Knight.

'Wilding writes the Plant novels with apparent ease. At the same time, he dares those among us who are averse to conspiracy theories to wonder whether we have been too sceptical.' – Peter Pierce, *Weekend Australian*.

THE TRAVEL WRITER ISBN 978192 5801378

'Keep Plant coming.' – David Williamson.

'The sustained pace and continuously witty dialogue makes this a great read. Such constant energy in the writing contrasts amusingly with Plant's wistful laments for all those aspects of the literary life that have been betrayed or lost forever but are, paradoxically, laments which make this a quintessentially literary novel.' – Brian Kiernan.

FIND ME MY ENEMIES and COVER STORY ISBN 978192 2952035

'This is the latest in Michael Wilding's crime fiction, and pretty soon into the work you'll be up to your neck in alleged murder, political intrigue, dubious characters and lashings of paranoia in a highly literary, and

hysterically funny, plot ... Wilding is a master of his criminal craft.' – Irina Dunn, *City Hub.*

'There is an immense pleasure of various kinds to be had in reading these two novels by Michael Wilding. His wit enlivens the crime fiction genre, and his acquaintance with other forms of literature, especially satire, constantly adds spice to Plant's adventures and misadventures in the mean streets.' – Nicholas Hasluck, *Quadrant*.

SUPERFLUOUS MEN ISBN 978192 1509476

'You have a way of being gloomily funny that speaks for all the early-retired and those who cannot avoid weary contempt for the bureaucrats both in and out of the universities.' – Frank Kermode.

'Wilding is a wicked observer of human foibles and bureaucracy; and he has an evilly good ear for the dopey chit-chat that so often passes for high flown discourse and earnest-speak. It's very funny.' – Diana Simmonds, *SAM*.

'You're the funniest writer around.' – Peter Corris.

'Why should the reader be interested in Michael's protagonists, these "drunken old men of a certain age, forgotten by the world and reciprocating its disregard"? Mostly it's because they are extremely funny, their verbal witticisms serving to starkly and sometimes surprisingly emphasize their point. Wilding's satirical edge evokes in the reader not only sly smiles of recognition but outright guffaws of full-blown belly laughter.' – Irina Dunn, *Quadrant*.

WILD BLEAK BOHEMIA: MARCUS CLARKE, ADAM LINDSAY GORDON AND HENRY KENDALL: A DOCUMENTARY ISBN 978192 5003802

Winner of the Prime Minister's Literary Award for non fiction and the Colin Roderick Award.

'A superb study of colonial culture … Wilding's splendid book,' – Peter Pierce, *Weekend Australian*.

'This wonderful book … this outstanding, original documentary,' – Patrick Morgan, *Quadrant*.

'A remarkable exercise in literary history … an extraordinarily rich picture,' – Paul de Serville, *Newtown Review of Books*.

MARCUS CLARKE: NOVELIST, JOURNALIST AND BOHEMIAN

ISBN 9781922454430

'Informal, often droll but informed ... scholarly and very entertaining.' – Steven Carroll, *The Age*.

'Reading these Wilding essays we feel we are in the company of an analyst who is in full command of his disparate material, and whose sensible non-bohemian judgments, having experienced a form of bohemian life himself, we come to instinctively trust.' – Patrick Morgan, *Quadrant*.

WILD ABOUT BOOKS: ESSAYS ON BOOKS AND WRITING

ISBN 978192 5801 989

Wilding's 'agile intellect, his terrifying energy, his chirpy wit. He has been a vivid figure in the Australian literary landscape since the 1960s, and this book is something of a swift landscape painting of the whole world of literature … The range of topics within the landscape of literature is broad, stretching from how novels come to be written, to the role of drugs in writing, to the phenomenon of celebrity, the meaning of surveillance … it's almost impossible to describe the varied and colourful subject matter spread out here for the reader's pleasure.' – Carmel Bird, *Weekend Australian*.

GROWING WILD ISBN 978192 5333107

'An important historical record of a seminal period in Australian writing, as well as a revealing insight into the life and mind of a writer … It is both an entertaining and visionary book on how to sustain a literary life and at the same time remain true to key intellectual values and beliefs.' – Ross Fitzgerald, *Weekend Australian*.

'This entertaining, instructive memoir by veteran Australian writer and publisher Michael Wilding … a memoir of one particular life and also of the milieus and movements it intersected with and animated:

those of scholars, academics, poets, fiction writers, anarchists and activists, in various permutations. *Growing Wild* is the memory of someone who always took notice, and always took notes.' – Inez Baranay, *Newtown Review of Books.*

COLONIALS, EXPATRIATES, RADICALS, MODERNS AND POSTMODERNS ISBN 9781923068766

'To read this collection of magazine and journal essays is in itself an education, encapsulating as it does a lifetime of study, writing and reflection. But there is more, for Wilding is a survivor of that generation that taught in the free universities of Australia, free in more than just the financial sense, and that cared about literature, and cared that you cared about it as well. His pre-lapsarian adhesion to the beneficial purposes of literature in society is an evident inspiration in his career and this book is a wonderful product of the libertarian project that inspired Australian literature for most of our history.' – Matthew White, *Quadrant*.